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FourFourTwo COLLECTION



CELEBRATING THE GAMES, GOALS AND GREATS THAT HAVE SHAPED FFT

Digital Edition

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WELCOME

Every month *FourFourTwo* brings you the latest exclusives from the world's biggest names, getting you up close and personal with World Cup winners, Premier League legends and rising stars. So you can probably appreciate that narrowing down a year's worth of content to 148 pages is no easy task. Even so, we reckon the features that await you represent some of the team's best work over the last 12 months or so.

In this latest collection we speak to Trent Alexander-Arnold about becoming the world's best, catch up with some of the stars of Arsenal's incredible Invincibles season and chat goals, injuries and national-team boycotts with the first ever Ballon d'Or Feminin winner, Ada Hegerberg. Speaking of football's biggest individual prize, we also take a look back at the fascinating history of the men's award.

If that wasn't enough, discover Messi's first year in Miami and what might be to come, relive Jurgen Klopp's greatest Liverpool games and join *FFT* as we head to Germany's most bitter derby between St Pauli and Hamburg.

Oh, and there are also articles about the birth of the replica football kit, the 30 best British footballers to play abroad and much more besides, so what are you waiting for?



Image Getty Images





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THE



MESSI EFFECT

Lionel Messi stamped his mark on football in the US from his very first match – this year, the maestro's mission is to help Inter Miami become MLS champions

Words *Andrew Murray*

LeBron James hollered like he'd just won a fifth NBA championship ring. Serena Williams watched on in wide-eyed disbelief as if witnessing herself triumph in a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam singles final. Beneath Kim Kardashian's trowel-applied make-up, the reality royalty was probably smiling the most rictus of grins.

The acrid phosphorus smell of pink and black pyro hung in the humid, heavy South Florida air around the trio's pitchside seats. "Inter Miami *golazo* scored by *numero diez*," trilled the stadium announcer, "Lionel..."

"MESSI!" exploded the exultant crowd, responding to the same call twice more with ever-increasing mania.

Inter Miami's new No.10 was barely 45 minutes into a bow that had begun with a frenzied welcome from the substitutes' bench. There had been goals disallowed for offside and Messi-created opportunities aplenty, but in the 95th minute, the shuffling Flea had just struck a free-kick of typical deft precision to secure a 2-1 win over Cruz Azul. A script writer would have been sacked for stretching the limits of credibility.

"As soon as I saw that the free-kick had been given, I thought, 'This is the way we're meant to win'," said a visibly moved Miami co-owner David Beckham at full-time. "Tonight is about the people. It's about this. This is what we always saw as our vision."

After scoring 10 goals in just seven games, the Argentine's genius delivered the Herons' first trophy within a month, Miami beating Nashville on penalties in the Leagues Cup final. In 2024, they will play in the revamped Champions Cup – the CONCACAF Champions League – for the first time, while they also kicked off the current MLS season as overwhelming favourites.

Sullen, quiet and moody in Paris, he looks happy for the first time in more than two years in his home from home. The reigning World Cup-winning captain is the new face of the league, bringing the sort of legitimacy, prestige and billions of eyeballs that not even Beckham at LA Galaxy from 2007 to 2012 could muster.

"This is our moment to change the football landscape in this country," Cuban-American billionaire Jorge Mas, Miami co-owner with Beckham, declared at Messi's July unveiling.

Arguably, Messi and Miami already have inside seven months, the former's impact gargantuan by every metric going. But how? And what's next for US soccer, especially when the world's greatest player departs?

THE NEW CARLOS VALDERRAMA

For five years, Messi to Miami was little more than a dream. In early 2018, when Beckham invoked the clause in his original LA Galaxy contract allowing him to establish his own MLS franchise, one of the first people to get in touch was Messi. "Who knows," quipped the Flea in a video message, "maybe in a few years you can give me a ring."

Just over three years later, Beckham did just that. The duo have always been friendly, but when the latter was forced out of his beloved Barcelona for Paris Saint-Germain in the summer of 2021, Golden Balls and fellow co-owners Jorge and Jose Mas' ambitious plan began in earnest.

"You're talking about a year-and-a-half's intensive talks to make this finally happen," ESPN football correspondent Luis Miguel Echegaray, who has worked closely with Messi for years, explains to *FFT*. "Jorge Mas took the lead on conversations with Messi's father, taking flights back and forth to Miami just trying to sell the project."

Though Messi considered a Barça return, the constant stream of updates coming from the Blaugrana camp – "there were a lot of leaks," Messi later explained – contrasted with Inter Miami, who continued to operate silently in the background.

"The Mas brothers and David Beckham were very patient, prudent and respectful towards the Messis," Nelson Rodriguez, MLS executive vice-president of sport and competition, tells *FFT*. "The family were clear from the outset that they didn't want public negotiations. The project and what it would mean, the lure of trying to be a transformational agent for the sport in a huge nation and up-and-coming league was part of it. And Miami is glamorous, a gateway city for South and Central America, and Europe too."

Some 70 per cent of Florida's second city is of Latin origin and one-third of the 300,000 Argentines to call the United States home live there. Messi, wife Antonela and sons Thiago,







"AS SOON AS I SAW THAT THE FREE-KICK HAD BEEN GIVEN, I THOUGHT, 'THIS IS HOW WE'RE MEANT TO WIN'"

Mateo and Ciro were already regular holiday visitors to Miami. The city reminded them of their Rosario home and they owned a couple of properties in the area.

"Forget the money, the main component is the personal," continues Echegaray. "Messi didn't totally dismiss moving to Saudi Arabia – he's already a tourism ambassador for the kingdom – and was seriously thinking about it, but the one person who said, 'You can go to hell if you're doing this' was Antonela. To Leo there are only three things in the world: football, Antonela and his kids. After being unhappy in Paris, he wanted to have a good time and relax in a city they know and love."

Football in Miami is nothing new. Although the Miami Dolphins (NFL), Miami Heat (NBA), Miami Marlins (MLB) and the University of Miami's various college teams hog the wider sporting diaspora, soccer is well established thanks to the Latin population's passion for it.

Left and above The stars came out to see Leo make his Miami debut; he sure put on a show

Even stretching back to its 1970s heyday, the closest NASL side, the Fort Lauderdale Strikers, could attract George Best and Gerd Muller. With a new stadium over by Miami Airport still under construction, Inter play on the temporary site of the Strikers' former Fort Lauderdale home, some 35 miles north of downtown Miami. In 1997, the short-lived Miami Fusion attempted to tap into the same South American market with Colombian perm Carlos Valderrama.

"Every time I'd see Jorge Mas, I'd ask him about it and every time he'd say, 'I think it's going to happen, it's not out of the question', but it seemed pretty crazy on paper," Michelle Kaufman, the *Miami Herald*'s beat writer for football and college basketball for more than 25 years, tells *FFT*.

"Why would the best footballer in the world want to come and play for the side bottom of the MLS Eastern Conference, who host games in a temporary stadium in the middle of nowhere in Fort Lauderdale? Beckham had in mind the waterfront stadium with overhead views of turquoise water and the beach, and it's definitely not that."

Yet the signs for the 36-year-old's imminent arrival were there, if you knew where to look. Not only was the No.10 shirt unassigned for the 2023 season, the No.5 was left reserved for Sergio Busquets and No.18 for Jordi Alba as the pieces began to fall into place. Miami were the sole MLS outfit to sell single tickets for matches up until July only.

"That was very strategic because they knew if Messi were to come, there would be a whole different price point," recalls Kaufman. "They added 3,000 seats that previously weren't available, in the corners, later after he signed.

"Head coach Phil Neville couldn't play with a full deck of cards, but it was quite obvious they were holding some spots open for Messi ▸

and friends on deals that wouldn't complete until the summer."

With the football world cruelly denied the chance to see Neville coaching arguably the best player in history after his June 2 sacking, former Barça and Messi boss Tata Martino his replacement, rumours turned into something more concrete. Less than a week later, Messi sat down with Catalan daily papers *El Mundo Deportivo* and *Sport* to rule out a Camp Nou return and reveal destination Miami.

"I was in Paris on vacation, literally standing under the Eiffel Tower, when I learned it was happening the next day," laughs Kaufman. That night, she sketched a story on her hotel room's bathroom floor while her other half slept on the other side of the door.

"My life changed from that day – my beat is now global, my page views have soared. It was already high-profile, because anything involving David Beckham is, but the team was struggling. Most days I was the only reporter at practice – five or six would be a real crowd.

"Now, we must apply in advance to attend training sessions, go through metal detectors and have our bags checked by security. They received 500 credential requests for his first session, approving 200. All for just 15 minutes of practice during which the squad stretched and did a few bits of dribbling."

There was even a helicopter and drone from one media outlet trying to shoot the session from overhead, while Argentine media have now sent reporters to live in Miami. "Breaking stories against those guys is extremely tough because they have contacts inside his circle," laments Kaufman.

"It was a circus and completely different – the eyes of the world were on Inter Miami. Everybody wanted to know every tiny thing about where he was living, where he did his shopping, what restaurants he went to, what car he's driving. A bodyguard accompanies Messi everywhere – if he goes into a store or restaurant, the crowd that forms outside via word of mouth is incredible.

"We used to have open locker rooms, which is standard in MLS and other US sports, where you go to a lobby area at the entrance to the locker room and camp out, talking to players as they emerged. That became a logistical nightmare and physically impossible because there's just no space. Journalists couldn't all squeeze into the press conference room, let alone somewhere smaller still. It's a bit more impersonal. The media relations team still work incredibly hard to get us who we need, though it's never Messi. He's only spoken to us once, last August."

In the build-up to his unveiling on July 17, Miami became overcome with Messi fever.



Picture @arlexcampos



Above Mural mania in Miami Below 10 goals in seven games inspired Inter to cup success



"I USED TO BE THE ONLY REPORTER AT PRACTICE – THE CLUB HAD 500 MEDIA REQUESTS FOR MESSI'S FIRST TRAINING SESSION"

A 'Messi's Coming' billboard dominated the airport architecture, while murals began to crop up across the city from Little Havana to Argentine stronghold North Beach. The best of the bunch appeared in the artistic district of Wynwood, designed by Venezuelan Arlex Campos and featuring the 5ft 7in magician in half Argentine colours and half Miami hot pink (left). Elsewhere, in nearby Doral, Prison Pals Brewery released a new beer, the can adorned with the same colour combination and a big No.10.

"It's the most elation you can feel as a fan, that this pursuit of a player since the club's first day had finally paid off and we'd got the best player of all time," smiles Inter Miami season ticket holder Morgan Guigon, better known as podcaster @IMCFTraveller on X. "That month from the announcement was filled with a crazy mix of anxiety, happiness and 'Wow, we've actually pulled this off'."

The unveiling, on a typically stormy mid-summer South Florida evening, included contributions from co-owners Beckham and the brothers Mas, as well as retired Argentine basketball legend Manu Ginobili and Miami royalty Gloria and Emilio Estefan welcoming Messi to town. He was beaming.

"Honestly, I'd never seen him happier," says ESPN's Echegaray, one of the few journalists to have interviewed Messi one-on-one since the move and who spent last summer in the city. "Winning the World Cup helped. It took that massive pressure off his shoulders. He'd achieved everything in the sport in Europe and with his country, so let's go and conquer this other thing."

IMPACT AND INJURY

If Messi thought the pressure would be off him in Miami, his debut against Cruz Azul in the Leagues Cup four days after his unveiling dispelled any such notions, the tournament presenting the chance for a reset. Bottom of the MLS Eastern Conference with five wins from 22 outings, the Herons could attack a new competition created to bring MLS and Liga MX sides together.

"It was perfect timing, because the NBA was coming to an end and there was no NFL," says Echegaray. "Under Neville, they were *horrible*. Maybe not statistically the worst, but watching them was painful.

"His debut was mad – it was 50 per cent Argentina shirts and 50 per cent pink. The community was so excited; the entire Latin community reclaimed him as their own."

As LeBron, Serena and Kim took their seats, narrative took over. Introduced in the 54th

minute, Messi watched his new team-mates concede an equaliser almost immediately, then proceeded to unleash his repertoire of feints, dinked passes and dextrous vision in search of a winner. Cruz Azul defenders blocked Messi shots admirably, and a square pass for Josef Martinez to tap in was ruled out for offside as it seemed the cameo would remain just that.

Then, deep into stoppage time, Cruz Azul captain Carlos Salcedo went through the back of Messi on the edge of the area. Free-kick. He couldn't, could he? "When he stepped up to take that free-kick, I looked at a friend next to me and said, 'This is going in'," recalls fan Guigon. "Tied game, new tournament, if there's a script, this is what's going to happen. That was the most insane I've ever seen that stadium, because it felt like a culmination of everything – the years the club had worked for, all coming together."

That perfect start unleashed a juggernaut. Two goals and an assist against 2018 MLS Cup winners Atlanta United. Another brace in a 3-1 swatting of local rivals Orlando City. Two more goals, including the 85th-minute equaliser, as the Herons recovered from 4-2 down with 10 minutes left to defeat Dallas on penalties in the last 16. One strike against Charlotte and Philadelphia Union in the quarter- and semi-final respectively, plus the opener in the showpiece at Nashville, another shootout success improbably wrapped up by goalkeeper Drake Callender's spot-kick.

Miami had their first silverware, less than a month into their brave new era, and Messi had already hit double figures. Elite European defences have been powerless to stop him for decades, so what chance did MLS and Liga MX have?

"It was a dream, totally surreal," concedes Guigon. "I was in Nashville and saw us raise that first trophy. It was a top-five moment of my life so far, being along for that run and seeing the magic Miami could put together, with Messi at the heart of it."

It could hardly have gone much better for MLS, either. "Miami's Leagues Cup triumph would have seemed pretty far-fetched even by Hollywood standards," says executive vice-president Rodriguez. "I did a lot of interviews with South American media just after Messi's arrival and was asked frequently whether he was coming to relax. I was indignant for *him*. There was nothing in his history that pointed to anything other than a fierce competitor who wants to win every game. That title was validating for him, the club and the city, as much as the league, because he proved yet again who he is."

Miami picked up seven points from nine in Messi's first three MLS games against New York Red Bulls, Nashville and LAFC. In addition to co-owner Will Ferrell, Leonardo DiCaprio, Selena Gomez, Tom Holland, Liam Gallagher and Prince Harry came to pay their respects to the new king in the 3-1 defeat of the latter.

"The whole team was unrecognisable," says Kaufman. The basic 4-2-3-1 shape that Phil Neville had deployed was the same, but with a crucial element at the heart of that creative trident. "Messi single-handedly led that side ▸

SERGIO BUSQUETS: "OUR INTENTION IS TO WIN"

The former Barcelona midfielder may be 35 now, but he's eyeing even more trophy glory in MLS...

Words Franco Panizo

What has it been like reuniting with your former Barcelona team-mates, Lionel Messi, Jordi Alba and Luis Suarez, in Miami?
We're very happy to meet up again after many years – that wasn't the case with Jordi, because we'd still been playing together at Barça, but I'm happy to be with Leo and Luis, and not just because it means we get to play together once again. It's more than that – we're mates and have great relationships. Now we can have our families back together while we live this experience. That makes this whole thing even more satisfying – and hopefully we win, as we did in our last stint at Barça.

How much time do you all spend together there?
It depends on the day. We see each other a lot at training, of course, but there are many days when our kids play football or go to school.

Do you think Suarez can be a big addition to the team this season?
He's scored goals throughout his career wherever he's played. If I'm not mistaken, last season he was the standout player in a tough old league like Brazil's first division and scored a lot of goals, delivered a lot of assists and had a brilliant year.

How do you make this all-star team into a side that wins the MLS title?
While we have players who have been very successful, have played together and get along really well off the pitch, it's clear that our ambition and intention is to win. That's why we came here, so yes the big names and players may be here, but we have to be a solid team. Whether we're considered the favourites or have star names, we have to demonstrate it on the field. We've had a pre-season and lots of practice that has served us well, especially for Leo, Jordi and myself, because last year we got here in the summer and practically had no time to train. We played every three or four days in various competitions. We have to work on being a solid team, on getting to know one another and trying to concede fewer goals – with the players we have in attack, I think we'll always have chances to score goals and win matches that way. So, the most important thing is to work hard on our defensive solidity.



What have you thought about the busy pre-season schedule, with plenty of travelling?
It's about looking at the sporting side alongside a chance to grow the club, to earn more revenue and benefit from that. This is also a big business and we understand that part, but we've also been playing teams who have given us a chance to raise our level. There has been travel and changes of time zones, but we're trying to prepare in the best way possible so that we're in top physical condition when the MLS season and other competitions get going. I trained when the 2023 season finished, because I wasn't used to having loads of time off and didn't want to go for too long without training, so I cut my close-season short. I took time to travel to Spain and yes I rested a bit too, which was necessary, but it's been about preparation so that when the season starts I'm in good condition.

What have you thought of MLS so far?
It's a good league and better than people think. Perhaps like in other leagues, there are some teams with more defined styles of play. For example, we would like to be a team that has control of the ball, that is positioned well tactically, that runs hard after the ball, that attacks a lot and pressures in the opposing half. But on the whole it's a league that has transitions and back-and-forth play, especially as the game goes on and the final minutes approach. That's the one comparison I'd make with La Liga in Spain, where the teams have more technical and tactical control, so as to not have many transitions. Generally speaking, though, the level is pretty similar. I would not say it's the same, but it's similar.

> **"MESSI WON AN EIGHTH BALLON D'OR, FLEW BACK OVERNIGHT AND TRAINED AT 10AM THE NEXT DAY"**

to that Leagues Cup title. Yes, Busquets and Alba did what they do, but even the players who were here previously – Robert Taylor, Benjamin Cremaschi, Leonardo Campana, David Ruiz – all elevated their game, partly to show him they're worthy of being his team-mate but also because they had more space to roam and shoot while the big three were being marked much tighter."

DeAndre Yedlin, Miami captain before you know who rocked up, speaks for many at the club of the good vibes. "He's always smiling, he talks to everybody," revealed the former Newcastle full-back. "He's completely mixed in with the group: the old guys, the young guys, just like a regular player. I had ridiculous respect for him as a player before he signed, but I have even more respect for him now – he's an unbelievable human being."

Perhaps the only surprise was the end to the 2023 season. Following that LAFC win, Messi missed six of Miami's nine remaining MLS games through a mixture of injury and fatigue, scoring just once. The Herons, also shorn of Busquets and Alba during the same period, won just once without their talisman and failed to reach the post-season play-offs.

"The minute he got hurt, everything went downhill," says the *Miami Herald*'s Kaufman. "It may as well be called Messi FC because it's his team. There was a buzz in the games he played, while in the games he missed it was deflating on and off the field."

Yet despite the damp squib finale, Messi, Busquets and Alba's mere presence has, along with Martino, presided over a sizeable uptick in standards across the division.

"The way they train and approach matches has already had a profound impact on Miami and also the clubs who have to play them," says MLS' Rodriguez. "They realise the level. You doubt Messi's commitment? He won an eighth Ballon d'Or [in October], flew overnight and was in training at 10am the next day. If anyone could be excused for arriving late for a session, that was it, but it speaks to his love of the game and respect for his team-mates."

"HE'S ORDERED PIZZA?!"

Off the field, a financial behemoth exploded in capitalism's spiritual home. Part of the reason for the month's delay between Messi's June announcement and July unveiling was to finalise the details of a contract that will see the Argentine pocket $50-60 million a year, a figure that includes basic salary – at $20.4m, more than the entire payroll of 25 of 29 MLS sides – plus bonuses and equity in the club once he retires.

Among the biggest commercial incentives is the cut he negotiated for sign-ups to Apple+, the TV streaming service which holds exclusive global broadcast rights to MLS and the Leagues Cup. Apple TV don't release official viewing figures, but leading subscriptions analysts Antenna reported MLS Season Pass sign-ups were up 1,690 per cent for Messi's Cruz Azul debut. In July, outlets reported 300,000 more subscribers, taking the total over one million. A month later, Apple CEO Tim Cook noted, "For MLS, we couldn't be happier with how the partnership is going."

MLS head honcho Rodriguez agrees. "No other league around the world has had the courage to try something like that – it's been successful too, and with two clicks of a button we're all over the world," he says, taking out his iPhone. "Apple have been public about how much this deal has already succeeded their expectations. Upon Messi's arrival, we doubled Season Pass subscriptions. We've had matches viewed in nearly 100 different nations worldwide."

Within 24 hours of Miami's Instagram account confirming Messi's arrival, it had a 500 per cent increase in followers. The club now has over 16 million, more than all US pro sports teams bar NBA sides the Golden State Warriors and LA Lakers. In the same period, the eBay market in Messi collectibles increased by 75 per cent, and Google searches by 1,200 per cent.

Messi's shirt became the most sold jersey of 2023 within 45 minutes of its launch on MLSStore.com, the league's retail site. Three days later, it was the



Right and below Messi merch sales have skyrocketed; MLS Season Pass sign-ups shot up by 1,690 per cent for his Miami bow







most sold in history. For Adidas, the official kit supplier for every MLS team and Messi's bootmaker, it's a symbiotic relationship.

"Adidas have been working towards this for decades," an insider who used to work for the manufacturer tells *FFT*. "Since Adidas signed Messi in 2006, he's never played for a club side whose kit is also made by Adidas – Barcelona and PSG were both Nike, though they had the 'double bubble', if you like, with Argentina. Messi going to MLS, and therefore everyone wearing Adidas kits and kicking Adidas balls, couldn't be a better outcome."

Even more tangential outlets are reaping the Messi economic kickbacks. The family have purchased a $10.75m eight-bedroom, nine-and-a-half bathroom property in the Bay Colony community in Fort Lauderdale, and many local realtors believe house prices nearby will rocket. Up to $400m is expected in extra tourism revenue in the wider Miami area as fans from around the world come to watch Messi's farewell tour.

Attendances across the board soared, too. Miami themselves, assisted by the building of 3,000 extra seats, saw a league-high 40 per cent increase in their average home crowd, up to 17,698, while also being the only MLS side to draw an average of more than 30,000 supporters across their away fixtures. In the ▸

TATA MARTINO: "WE KNOW THE EYES OF THE WORLD ARE WATCHING US"

Inter's boss explains how the presence of Messi and other stars has changed things at the club

Words Franco Panizo

With Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba in your squad, do you think you have a 'Super Team' of all-stars, as sometimes seen in the NBA?
I like the NBA – previously the Super Teams were made of two star players, then it became three and now there are Super Teams of four. Even with that, it's not easy to win a title. I know we'll finish building a very good team that will demand that we compete well. We also know what that generates in our opponents. When the Wizards take on Milwaukee in the NBA, the Wizards play better and want to outdo Milwaukee because they have three or four top players. We have to prepare that we'll get the best from our opponents. Does it guarantee that we'll win titles? Only if we prepare well and move away from the idea that we'll win just by having players with a proven history. The teams that win are the ones that live in the present.

Do you feel under any pressure to get results, because of the stars?
Not at all. I have the possibility to manage very good players, to have a competitive team, and obviously that comes with responsibilities. What we have to do is try to win, like we did last year. We had good results in some competitions and not so good results in others. But yes, we're in a place where the eyes of the world are watching because of the names that Inter Miami has.

What's your favourite moment managing Messi in Miami so far?
I always like to focus on football, and the one that sticks with me is the pass to Benjamin Cremaschi in the New York Red Bulls game.

That was great vision from Messi, before the return pass allowed Leo to score his maiden MLS goal. You've added Suarez this season, what impact can he have?
We'll have to take precautions with his knee, but we hope to see what he has done regularly during the last 15 seasons. We hope to find a very good version of him, just like last year at Gremio.

The fans understandably want to see every big star play. What do you say to them if maybe that doesn't happen in some games, like when Messi is away at the Copa America this summer?
We have a responsibility to make the people feel well represented by us on the field when the biggest stars aren't playing. If people know that for different reasons Leo is not going to be there, or Sergio, Luis or Jordi, it would be wonderful that people know they'll still see a very competitive side – that way people can come to games regardless.

Did you find it tricky last season when there were expectations to see the stars in every game, and there was disappointment when Messi was injured?
One thing that was difficult was this topic of their availabilities and whether 'More tickets will be sold'. I would love to have them all play every game, but we cannot make those decisions based on whether we can sell more or less tickets with them out on the field. The reality is that if they are healthy then they'll play the majority of the games, but we also have an obligation to take care of them and the team.

You've been embarking on a long pre-season in different countries. Have you had any concern that players might be tired?
We understand there's a business side and a sporting side – we try to make both co-exist. Playing in Saudi Arabia, Japan and Hong Kong has been well organised – it was initially planned when we were doing our final training sessions at the end of 2023. We've been trying to manage the minutes of each player, while understanding that the contracts demand our best players take part.







six MLS away games after Messi's arrival, that average was 45,764. Chicago Fire achieved a record 62,124 at Soldier Field, Charlotte welcomed 66,101 people (against a 34,476 average) and Atlanta United 71,635. Those three kept their new followers, too, in their next home game post-Miami – Charlotte had 2,931 more fans than average, Chicago 1,860 and Atlanta a 1,675 bump. To make the most of this, Sporting Kansas City have announced that their home match against Miami will be played at NFL side the Chiefs' 79,451-seater Arrowhead Stadium.

The difficulty comes when Messi isn't able to play. Despite the record numbers, and pink Messi No.10 shirts dominating, he missed the Chicago and Atlanta trips through injury.

On the day before the latter game, Martino had told his Friday morning press conference that Messi was fit after international duty and would travel to Atlanta that afternoon with the rest of the squad. That night, he posted an Instagram video of a pizza delivery at his Miami home. On Saturday morning, he was filmed at eldest son Thiago's Miami academy match, Martino explaining after a 5-2 defeat that Messi and Jordi Alba had been absent with "muscle fatigue".

Though some fans stayed sanguine, others were devastated, some driving more than five hours for a once-in-a-lifetime moment that didn't happen. In the NFL and NBA, sides must list players officially as 'questionable' prior to each fixture.

"Fans complained that there wasn't enough transparency," says *Miami Herald* journalist Kaufman. "If they knew he wasn't going to play, they should have said so earlier in the week, but the coaches kept insisting that if he said he was ready to play, he would play. Sometimes he would make that decision on matchday itself, and by then thousands of people have bought tickets.

"That's sport. There's no guarantee when you buy your ticket four months in advance that the star is going to play. At a concert, the singer can get sick and cancel, but for the most part you know you'll see the show."

The Chicago non-appearance had been foreseen, the Fire announcing $250 or $50 season- or single-ticket credit respectively for 2024 for fans who paid over the odds to watch a Messi-less Miami.

"Even Chicago coach Frank Klopas said, despite Messi not playing, that it was still a great thing for the club to have that many people in the stadium who then came back," explains Kaufman. "Many teams found something similar. The league has benefitted even in the games he didn't feature, as fans have thought, 'Hey, this is better than I expected'."

As teams seek to cash in across the board, ticket prices have also followed the upward curve. The Miami game at LAFC had prices of $600, up 500 per cent, while they rose by 1,288 per cent from $36 to $500 at New York Red Bulls. Prices on secondary markets are higher-still – Dallas tickets had an alarming 2,060 per cent markup.

At Miami's DRV PNK Stadium, there was a 1,000 per cent hike on the $40 seats behind the goal for Messi's Cruz Azul bow, the single-ticket average mushrooming from $152 to a hefty $935. The cheapest season ticket is now $884 (up from $484) for 17 MLS games. A $3,600 ticket in the Midfield Club section in 2023 now costs $7,650.

"Loads of people got priced out," laments podcaster and season ticket holder Guigon. "You go from paying $1,500 for two season tickets to about $4,000 for 2024, and for a lot of the working class and even middle-class people who should be the core support of any football club, they can't afford that.

"The club went about it with an attitude of 'Hey, thanks for being with us from day one, but we can make more money if we sell your seats to someone else, so we don't really care if you leave'. We were told in our first season in 2020 that we would always matter and be central to what the club does. Then Messi arrives and they chase this extra cash they can get instead. The trade-off is too great."

Guigon has noted an increasing disconnect. Players used to stroll to the stadium from the adjacent training centre, interacting with supporters as they went. Now, the squad board a bus after their team meal, are taken 250ft down the road and hop off again behind a high-wire security fence.

"In the early days, you could find the Mas brothers or Beckham around the stadium and they were



Above "We're only here for the Messi, here for the Messi" **Below** "OK, you're officially better at taking free-kicks!"

"MESSI IS THE HIGH-TICKET ITEM BUT THE FANS WILL ALWAYS BE THERE. THEY NEED TO BE PROTECTED MORE"

willing to talk and be upfront with the fans, listening to us," he reflects. Then there's the difference between the Miami and Messi fan.

"I hate to say it, because I'll get messages about this, but it's very noticeable," continues Guigon. "They only come to the ground when he plays. They'll only buy Messi merchandise and do anything if it involves him. That's not a sustainable way to establish a fanbase or culture, catering only to those new fans.

"Miami are making all their sporting choices around this one- or two-year window. It feels more Club Internacional de Futbol Messi, not Club Internacional de Futbol Miami.

"I've already reached the point where I'm considering my future support of the club – I have been for a little while. I know lots of fans who got rid of their season tickets and went to the local tier-two side Miami FC. I'll have a very difficult decision to make around renewing for 2025."

Such issues are so divisive that they've split sections of the fanbase. *FFT* contacted three of the four official Inter supporters' clubs for comment, but were ignored or turned down. Another fan asked not to be interviewed due to the backlash in a fervid local community at previous comments they'd made.

Kaufman sympathises, to a point. "If you want it to be the old, quaint way with tickets half the price and the ability to have a selfie with DeAndre Yedlin or whoever, then you can't have Messi on the team," she insists. "Fans tend to complain a lot but, if you ask if they'd rather Messi go to another MLS team or Saudi Arabia, the answer would always be no. Where I agree is on the price. If they're having to pay double for 17 MLS home games because Messi is on the team, then you want him to be on the field for each one of those matches you're paying exorbitant sums for.







Top to bottom Price hikes and culture shifts are leaving fans feeling cut off; getting the old Barcelona band back together

The problem is if he starts to miss a run of games, or needs a rest."

ESPN's Echegaray concurs. "More needs to be done to protect the regular fans," he says. "Most fans would expect prices to go up after you sign Leo Messi and the club changing a bit, but you have to protect the people who have been there from the beginning and will be there after Messi.

"When you spike the tickets so much, and don't protect them from secondary markets, what are you *doing*? They make all the noise. Messi is the high-ticket item, but they'll be there afterwards."

For their part, MLS say they are monitoring the situation. "It's an interesting question," says executive vice-president Rodriguez. "We have to be cognisant of the balance because this is Major League Soccer, not Messi League Soccer. Lionel's time as a player will pass – we hope he'll continue to have an affiliation to the club and the league beyond that – so we have to find that balance.

"But we believe if people come to watch Messi, they'll see youngsters like Benjamin Cremaschi and think, 'Hey, that's a tidy little player there, he's attractive, good guy, good story'. These are the things we have to do to develop the league. We must capture that aspect of fandom. Ecuador fans might come to this summer's Copa America, hosted here in the States, see their players from MLS and stick around for more."

PELE, ALI AND THE POPE

The 2024 season presents a point of flux in the Inter Miami story. Before the campaign kicked off, the Herons embarked upon a 24,000-mile pre-season tour to four countries, including El Salvador, Hong Kong and an inevitable friendly against Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia. That's before a possible 60-plus-game season featuring MLS, Champions Cup, Leagues Cup and US Open Cup.

Messi is now 36, Busquets 35, and Alba 34, with the trio joined ahead of the new season by 37-year-old Luis Suarez in what is fast resembling a Barcelona retirement home. El Pistolero cancelled his Gremio contract a year early to link up with his best mate – like Alba, the Uruguayan isn't a designated player and has taken a significant pay cut to do so. Suarez scored 29 goals in 54 goals in all competitions while in Brazil, but admits to needing daily injections just to have two vaguely functioning knees.

"We know how close the pair are, we know his reputation, both good and bad, and what he's like as a No.9, which he's proven for so many years," continues Echegaray. "But the medical team will have their work cut out to get him through the season. Travel is an issue in MLS more than many leagues and artificial pitches don't help either.

"It's so important for Inter Miami to have a deep, collective philosophy under Martino and not just their 'superstars'. One of the best stories from last season was Benjamin Cremaschi and they need more guys like that to keep the engine running. If Messi, Suarez, Busquets and Alba are the golden stars, the rest of the squad has to be the coal added to the fire to keep it going. MLS Cup winners don't just have a star, they have a squad."

Messi will miss five MLS matches, maybe seven or more, to play in the Copa America this summer – the final is at Miami Dolphins' Hard Rock Stadium, obviously. He'll feature in Argentina's World Cup qualifiers, too.

For a team whose fortunes have depended so entirely on the man who will turn 37 this summer, finding depth is vital. Last season's best centre-back Kamal Miller has been sold to Portland Timbers – head coach, Phil Neville – and replaced by Argentine defender Nicolas Freire, although former two-time MLS Cup-winning midfielder Julian Gressel is a shrewd signing. The former Atlanta midfielder covers three roles and has 25 goals and 56 assists in 200 MLS games. "The biggest question mark is the health and fitness of the big four," says fan Guigon, "because if they're able to go full speed in every important match, Miami will

thrive. But if they pick up injuries or fatigue, Miami will struggle."

Nevertheless, they're most people's favourites to be champions. "Anything other than a deep run in the play-offs, semis at least, would be a big letdown," says local journalist Kaufman. "You can't have that roster, those four Barcelona guys back on the same team, and finish in sixth. That would be a massive disappointment, and unacceptable.

"There are no more excuses following last season's arrivals. They've set themselves up as an all-star team with high expectations. There will be gigantic pressure on this side to win from the get-go on February 21 against Real Salt Lake. They're *the* favourite."

For his part, vice-captain Yedlin isn't fazed. "The more time we have together, the more dangerous we'll be," he said. "Tata's really possession heavy and wants us to dominate matches. If that means taking certain risks, putting numbers forward, then that's what we're going to do. He's so stubborn on that. We've been learning on the fly, but with a full pre-season we'll be able to show how good we can be."

Winning is the quickest way to establishing the sort of legacy Inter Miami and MLS want from the Messi project. "He has completely embraced the club, community, everything," says Echegaray. All three of Messi's sons are in the academy and he's regularly spotted talking to youngsters. "This is why he's so happy. Inter Miami told him he'd be a major part of their identity. It's not just about being our leader on the pitch but our ambassador.

"Any other market, obviously Messi takes over – he goes to Los Angeles, New York, of course, but Miami is different because of the Latin influence. Almost all the academy kids come from a diverse background and that's such a big thing for him."

All 21 and under, Cremaschi, David Ruiz, Ian Fray and Noah Allen are South Florida natives and already first-team regulars. Both they and Messi will inspire new generations, who'll grow up with a Miami Freedom Park stadium within the city limits from next year.

"I'm a referee for youth football down here and ended up reffing one of his son Thiago's matches," reveals Guigon. "It was an unreal experience to do that and thinking, 'Wow, Lionel Messi is one of the parents watching me'. Seeing his impact on youth football, and players on both teams in disbelief that they're being watched by the greatest player of all time, is just extraordinary to see."

Starting with the Copa America this year, the US will host the Club World Cup in 2025, the World Cup in 2026 and the Olympics in 2028. They're also favourites to be chosen to stage the next Women's World Cup in 2027. That's five years, with Messi at the heart of it.

"The world will be on our shores," says MLS' Rodriguez. "I don't think another nation could put those five events back to back. They'll see our game, fans, tifos and culture and say 'I'll follow this. My second favourite team is in MLS'. If we make MLS everyone's second favourite league, we'll eventually become the biggest in the world."

"LEBRON COMING TO MIAMI HEAT WAS SO BIG, BUT IT WASN'T ANYTHING LIKE THIS"





Top Miami fans have high hopes for this season Above Leo and his family have fully embraced their new home

Miami Dolphins head coach Mike McDaniel has said Messi in Vice City is "one of the most monumental things to happen to American sports in my lifetime". That includes Messi's co-owner, Beckham. "I've been a sportswriter for 35 years and never seen one athlete have such an impact on or off the field," declares Kaufman. "LeBron coming to Miami Heat was really big, but it wasn't anything like this."

MLS' Rodriguez goes further. "I equate him to Pele, Muhammad Ali and the Pope," he says. "Media itself was so different that those three had global acclaim at a time where you're waiting for the next day's papers to be shipped around the world. Ali and Pele had staying power. Messi has reached a level of acclaim based on his skill. That resonates. The intensity is higher than ever. It's love. Love for him reaches every part of the world."

One of those three brought football to the US in the '70s, another transcended boxing to transform what it meant to be a sportsman, the other is the Argentine figurehead of the Catholic Church, the holiest man on the planet. His compatriot, diminutive of stature but discernible of reach, is bigger still. John Lennon once said the Beatles might be more popular than Jesus.

Lionel Andres Messi definitely is. This is his world, we're all just living in it.

DEAN SMITH: "I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO PITTING MY WITS AGAINST A TEAM WITH LIONEL MESSI IN IT"

The former Aston Villa, Norwich and Leicester boss now manages Charlotte FC – this year, he has to figure out how to stop arguably the greatest player of all

Words Ryan Dabbs

You became manager of North Carolina club Charlotte FC in December. How did it come about?
I was asked whether I wanted to join the process to become head coach here – I'd met the directors before, when I came to watch a Charlotte game about 18 months ago. When I joined the process for the job, I thought about it and asked questions to people I know who coach and play in MLS. I also spoke to my family, because it's not just a big move for me, but also for them as well. Fortunately, I've got a son who's been playing out in the Carolinas for the last six years, so that obviously helped our decision. We've had vacations here over the last six years because of that, so we know it fairly well. I really liked what I'd heard about the club, then when I visited the facilities I was impressed with them. I thought it was going to be the right challenge for me at this time.

You're one of five English managers in MLS, together with Phil Neville (Portland), Nick Cushing (New York City), Gary Smith (Nashville) and John Herdman (Toronto). Did you talk to any of the other four while considering the job?
No, although I did speak to Kwame Ampadu, the assistant coach of Columbus Crew, who won MLS last year. I played with Kwame [at Leyton Orient] and asked him for his opinion – he was at Montreal before also. He certainly believed it's a really improving league, and one I'd enjoy managing in.

All eyes are on MLS now because of Lionel Messi. Are you looking forward to facing him and Inter Miami later on in the year?
Yeah, the name's synonymous with the sport in general, and he's certainly helped to build a massive interest in MLS. But it's growing more than just because of the impact of one player. It's a young league, a growing league, so having the world's best player here can only enhance it. I'm really looking forward to pitting my wits against a side with Messi in it.



When you started out as a manager at Walsall, did you expect to be taking on Messi one day?
I've had to work hard to get where I am now. To coach in the Premier League was huge for me – I remember coaching under-14 teams while my daughter did her homework on the side of the pitch, so to now be pitting my wits against the world's best is testament to what hard work can get you. My job now is to help build Charlotte FC into a team that competes regularly, as one of the top six or eight that fights for the trophy at the end of the season. I want to create a new identity for them with a successful style of play.

How will you find the travelling for each away game?
It's different – the mode of travel is normally a plane, because the country is so vast. Going back to my first coaching job at Leyton Orient, when we had to travel to Carlisle it was an eight-hour bus journey, so I've been used to travelling before and I'll be used to travelling here by the end of it.

Do you see managing Charlotte as a chance to build your profile again, after a couple of difficult jobs with Norwich and Leicester that resulted in relegation from the top flight in each case?
Well, first thing's first, I can't get relegated here! Despite relegation, I was quite happy with what I left behind at Leicester – when I arrived, the team had only picked up one point out of the previous 30, so we needed a lot more to try to stay up. Unfortunately we didn't, but I thought we still managed to get the players working really hard again for the club, and in the end we were unfortunate to go down. At Norwich, I left them in fourth position in the Championship, so there can't be too much disappointment.

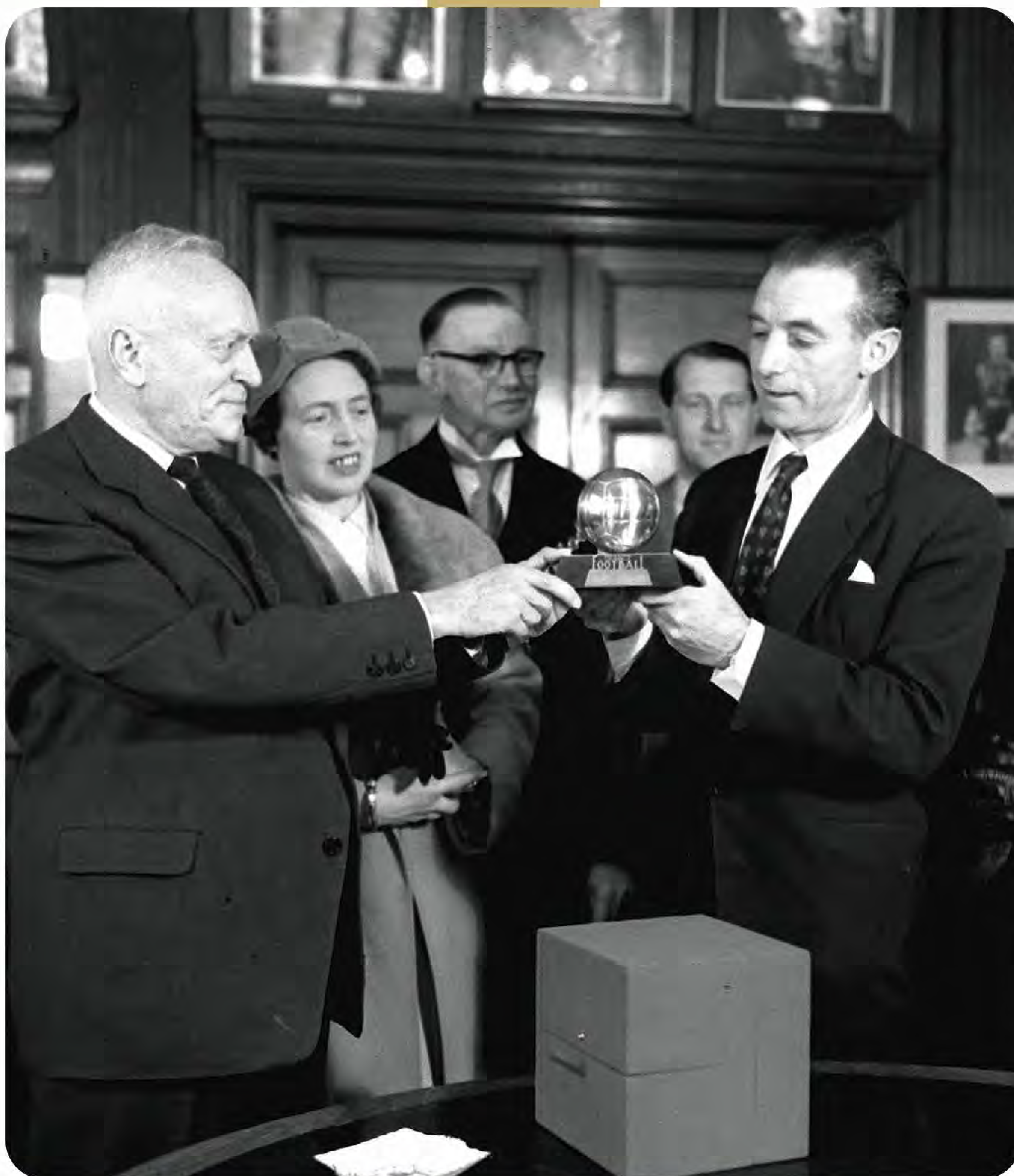
Do you still have ambitions to return to the Premier League in the future?
My focus right now is, and always has been, whichever club I'm managing at and going through as many lessons as I can to become a better manager. I'll give everything here at Charlotte, so that's where my concentration and focus will be.

THE HISTORY OF THE BALLON D'OR

With Lionel Messi winning a record-extending eighth golden orb back in October 2023, FFT explores the prestigious prize's history, veering from Blackpool to Barcelona, via the man who inspired Half Man Half Biscuit and a future Charlton Athletic star...

Words Ed McCambridge

FIFA BALLON D'OR™



> "THERE IS SOMETHING OF CHAPLIN IN MATTHEWS. HE IS LIGHT HUMOUR, BUT DI STEFANO IS AN EPIC"

SIR STANLEY MATTHEWS: THE FIRST WINNER (AGED 41)

In Sir Stanley Matthews' pioneering pomp, the Wizard of the Dribble's speed wowed as much as his supernatural footwork. During the 1930s and 1940s, as many as 10,000 extra fans would squeeze through turnstiles whenever the legendary winger was in town, desperate to see the sinuous genius shimmy past defenders.

The secret to this incredible lightness of being? "Stan warmed up with weighted boots on, like a diver's boots," said former Spurs and Wales wideman Cliff Jones. Matthews' unusual footwear helped to build strength in his lower legs, providing a sensation of weightlessness once removed for kick-off.

Above "You're good, Stan, but Di Stefano got my vote, sorry"

It was one of many tricks employed by a man who played more than 800 senior matches for Stoke, Blackpool and England in a career spanning 33 years and a world war. The greatest of those was the 1953 FA Cup Final. Such was Matthews' virtuosity in front of a 27-year-old Queen Elizabeth II at Wembley, he inspired Blackpool back from 3-1 down with 22 minutes left to beat Bolton 4-3. Stan Mortensen scored a hat-trick, but it came to be known as 'The Matthews Final'.

Three years later, he'd receive individual recognition of a different kind. Now aged 41, the England international had powered the Seasiders to second place in the 1955-56 First Division behind Manchester United's Busby Babes – the club's highest ever finish, even more impressive for a side who'd come 19th just a season earlier. Matthews laid on many of top scorer Jackie Mudie's 22 league goals, before steering England on course for victory in the 1956-57 Home Championship.

Dazzling performances against Ireland and Wales had earned the veteran fresh acclaim across Europe. His timing couldn't have been better. Ex-France defender Gabriel Hanot, by then editor of respected football newspaper *L'Equipe*, was putting the finishing touches to his latest landmark idea. The inventor of the European Cup wanted a prize to honour the continent's best individual, to complement his trophy for the greatest team.

Hanot and his fellow French journalists each named their top three European players of 1956, with the recipient of the most votes to be handed a golden ball – or 'Ballon d'Or' to our Gallic neighbours.

The inaugural award garnered such little fanfare that when Matthews accepted the gong – a far smaller trophy than today's 7kg gold-encrusted orb – from Hanot (left), the setting wasn't a glitzy Paris ceremony, but Blackpool Town Hall. Also in attendance were Matthews' first wife Betty, plus the coastal resort's mayor, who presented a china plate to commemorate the day.

In truth, Hanot would rather have been somewhere else, pictured instead alongside one of the also-rans – superstars such as Lev Yashin (who was fifth), Ferenc Puskas (fourth), Raymond Kopa (third) and, his personal pick, runner-up Alfredo Di Stefano. "In the right-winger Stanley Matthews, there is something of Charles Chaplin," Hanot later grumbled in magazine *France Football*, who organise the prize to this day. "In Alfredo Di Stefano, we celebrate a great knight, who brings together courage and invincibility. Stanley Matthews is light humour. Di Stefano is an epic."

Perhaps Hanot felt Matthews' victory owed too much to his longevity, not a sublime 12 months for club and country. The Blackpool conjuror hadn't even nailed his own nation's top-player gong – Manchester City goalkeeper Bert Trautmann scooped the Football Writers' Association award in 1955-56. Di Stefano, by comparison, had plundered 29 goals in all competitions as Real Madrid bagged the first ever European Cup against Reims in Paris. Still, a vote's a vote.

Hanot may not have got who he wanted, but his prize would grow into an important event in the football calendar. The Frenchman continued to deliver the award to each year's winner until his death in 1968. As for china plates, you'd have to ask Karim Benzema if those are still a thing. ▸

BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN



THE IMPERIOUS MASOPUST DREW FIRST BLOOD IN THE 1962 WORLD CUP FINAL AGAINST BRAZIL

If, like cult British indie band Half Man Half Biscuit, you've ever dreamed of getting a Dukla Prague away kit on Christmas Day, Josef Masopust may be unintentionally responsible. Back in 1962, the powerhouse midfielder became the first man to win the Ballon d'Or from behind the Iron Curtain, which metaphorically enshrouded much of central and eastern Europe between 1945 and 1991.

Masopust's five Czechoslovakian league titles with Dukla had hitherto escaped global plaudits, but his performances at the 1962 World Cup couldn't be ignored. The imperious left-half drew first blood against Brazil in the Santiago final, slotting home from close range in the 15th minute. Garrincha & Co would go on to win but, as non-Europeans weren't yet eligible to collect the Ballon d'Or, Masopust was an obvious choice.

It didn't take too long for another winner to emerge from behind the Curtain. Twelve months on, Dynamo Moscow gloveman Lev Yashin became the first (and only) goalkeeper crowned. The Black Spider had won a league title that season but, with no international competition in 1963 and Soviet outfits still to take part in the European Cup, his election over Gianni Rivera and Jimmy Greaves seems intriguing at first glance. In the run-up to the vote, however, Yashin represented a Rest of the World XI against England at Wembley to mark 100 years of association football – playing alongside the likes of Masopust, Eusebio, Alfredo Di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas. Reporter Norman Giller praised "the magnificent goalkeeping of Russia's Man in Black". Only Italians Dino Zoff and Gianluigi Buffon (second in 1973 and 2006) have ever come close to emulating Yashin.

Two more Soviet players would snaffle the award before the Curtain fell: Oleg Blokhin pipped Franz Beckenbauer and Johan Cruyff in 1975, and fellow Dynamo Kyiv star Igor Belanov relegated Gary Lineker to second following four goals and six assists at the 1986 World Cup, having already secured the European Cup Winners' Cup.

Only one Hungarian has claimed a Ballon d'Or, and it wasn't the legendary Puskas. In 1967, Florian 'The Emperor' Albert's 38 goals in 40 Ferencvaros games in all competitions – sealing the domestic league title – proved enough to beat Bobby Charlton and Celtic's Lisbon Lion Jimmy Johnstone to the award.

Hristo Stoichkov, the East German-born Matthias Sammer, Pavel Nedved and Andriy Shevchenko all won the Ballon d'Or after the fall of Communism, although the world had changed by then. In 1996, nominee Trifon Ivanov was allowed to purchase a tank from the Bulgarian army and drive it around the countryside near his home during spare time. Now *that* sounds like a HMHB song...

Above Masopust already had his Dukla Prague kit, so made do with the Ballon d'Or...



LA LIGA'S EARLY DOMINANCE

The very first Ballon d'Or may have headed to England, but La Liga soon took a stranglehold – the subsequent four winners played in Spain.

After losing out to "Charlie Chaplin" himself in the inaugural vote, Alfredo Di Stefano (above) won two of the next three. The Blond Arrow's French team-mate Raymond Kopa bagged the gong in between to seal a Real Madrid hat-trick, hardly surprising given that Los Blancos captured the first five European Cups. The prize stayed in Spain in 1960, with (original, less bitey) Luis Suarez of Barcelona saluted as Europe's finest.

The Ballon d'Or's Spanish infatuation has seldom dwindled. Players from Spanish clubs – well, just Madrid and Barça – have won the trophy 24 times combined, more than sides from any other nation. Recent voters have been equally as Hispanophile, with only one prize since 2009 not hoovered up by a Clasico representative – even then, Paris Saint-Germain's Lionel Messi had been at Barça for half of 2021. The best of La Liga's rest? Atletico Madrid's Paulo Futre, later of West Ham, who finished second in 1987 shortly after European Cup success at Porto.

ONE OF OUR OWN

Trend-setting Sir Stan was the United Kingdom's first Ballon d'Or winner, paving the way for these five to follow

DENIS LAW
1964

The Lawman (right) became Scotland's only Ballon d'Or winner after scoring a ludicrous 46 goals in 42 games in all competitions for Manchester United across the 1963-64 season. That club-record tally still stands, not bad for someone derided as "weak, puny and bespectacled" on trial at Huddersfield less than a decade earlier. The Aberdeen native, Sir Alex Ferguson's hero, was one of three Brits nominated in 1964 along with Jimmy Greaves and Bobby Moore, claiming the award despite the Red Devils winning nothing – unthinkable by today's standards.



SIR BOBBY CHARLTON
1966

The closest call in Ballon d'Or history was ultimately settled by a single vote. Charlton's 81-80 victory over Portuguese phenomenon Eusebio, who'd scored 37 goals in 30 Benfica games throughout the previous campaign and grabbed the Golden Boot at the 1966 World Cup, would likely have gone the other way had it not been for two particular results. In the first, Manchester United toppled the Lisbon giants in the European Cup quarter-finals with Charlton (right) notching in a 5-1 away win. The second ended with England advancing to the World Cup final following a 2-1 success against Portugal at Wembley – Charlton's superb brace that day overcame Eusebio's spot-kick, putting the Three Lions on the path to glory via Hurst and all that.



GEORGE BEST
1968

The youngest, most mesmerising member of Manchester United's Holy Trinity (above right) was also the last to receive the Ballon d'Or, in 1968. The 22-year-old had enjoyed an outstanding season for Matt Busby's men, scoring 28 league goals for a share of the First Division's Golden Boot before snaring the FWA Footballer of the Year gong. Yet it was the Belfast boy's performances on the continent that caught global attention. The Fifth Beatle netted in United's European Cup semi-final first leg victory over Real Madrid, then added an audacious goal – his 32nd in all competitions – to help beat Benfica in the Wembley showpiece, sitting the goalkeeper down and slotting the ball into an empty net.





KEVIN KEEGAN
1978, 1979

King Kev's shock decision to ditch European champions Liverpool for Hamburg in the summer of 1977 left many incensed. Reds gaffer Bob Paisley suggested his former charge should never play for England again, while even some of his new team-mates in Germany fumed at the £500,000 forward's arrival. "If you put this little English guy in, we don't want to work with you," a group of players fronted by captain Peter Nogly told manager Rudi Gutendorf. "We don't need him and we don't like him." Charming. After a disappointing opening season in Germany, however, Mighty Mouse propelled HSV to second place by Christmas 1978, when he was first crowned Europe's best footballer, then directed the club to a first Bundesliga title in 19 years. Kev (below left) was named Europe's finest again in 1979 and remains the only Brit to win it twice. Best perm, too.



MICHAEL OWEN
2001

It's hard to believe now, given Owen's, er, dry commentary style, that he was once the most exciting thing in football. Three years on from his sensational solo effort against Argentina at France 98, the jet-heeled goal machine (bottom) led Liverpool to a treble of pots – League Cup, FA Cup, UEFA Cup – with 24 strikes in all competitions in 2000-01. Among them were two in a six-minute spell at the end of a 2-1 triumph over Arsenal in the middle of those finals. Owen celebrated his 22nd birthday just four days before being confirmed as the Ballon d'Or winner, where he denied Raul and Oliver Kahn. At that point another seemed all but certain, but injuries took their toll. Despite the boredom of long layoffs, Owen still steadfastly eschewed the cinema, famously having watched 13 films in his life. *Cool Runnings*? "I was in Hell." ▸

"IF YOU PUT THIS LITTLE ENGLISH GUY IN, WE DON'T WANT TO WORK WITH YOU. WE DON'T NEED HIM"

PLATINI WON THREE GONGS IN A ROW TO BEGIN AN UNPRECEDENTED SPELL OF ITALIAN CLUB DOMINANCE

WHEN SERIE A RULED

Say it quietly, but there was a time that preceded the Premier League's gazumping of the rest of Europe in money and prestige. A time when Serie A, like the Roman Empire long before it, ruled the world.

Early Italian Ballon d'Or recipients included Juventus forward Omar Sivori and Milan star Gianni Rivera in the 1960s, but the nation's most sun-kissed spell began with the Azzurri being crowned champions at the 1982 World Cup. Juventus poacher Paolo Rossi's six goals earned him the Golden Boot and the Golden Ball, as the tournament's best performer. That December, the 26-year-old picked up the Ballon d'Or, and he remains the only player to stockpile those four prizes in a single year.

The following winter witnessed the greatest landslide in Ballon d'Or history. Michel Platini, Rossi's Bianconeri team-mate, tonked Kenny Dalglish by 110 votes to 26 – his reward for leading the Old Lady to Coppa Italia glory as well as the European Cup final.

It was the Frenchman's first of three gongs on the bounce as the No.10 guided club and country to relentless success over the next two seasons, including a Scudetto, European Cup and Cup Winners' Cup at Juventus, plus Euro 84 with Les Bleus. Milan's Dutch deity Ruud Gullit won the prize in 1987, as a period of unprecedented Serie A near-domination continued. In 1988, the Rossoneri became the first club side to boast all of the Ballon d'Or's top three, as Marco van Basten, Gullit and Frank Rijkaard completed the triumvirate. Milan were Serie A kings that season, but the Netherlands' triumph at Euro 88 contributed to the whitewash.

The same couldn't be said 12 months later, with Franco Baresi nabbing Gullit's runner-up place to guarantee the club repeated the trick – recognition for their 4-0 European Cup final rout of Steaua Bucharest.

Inter then picked up the mantle in 1990, as Lothar Matthaus and Andreas Brehme came first and third (West Germany's World Cup victory getting the assist), while Juve striker Toto Schillaci – Italia 90's Golden Boot winner – was runner-up. It meant that for three years in a row, all three of the Ballon d'Or podium finishers played for Italian sides, a feat never repeated.

Five more Serie A winners would follow in the '90s, among them Van Basten, Roberto Baggio and Zinedine Zidane. For an absurd 13 years out of 17, the Ballon d'Or supremo played his club football in Italy – even Julius Caesar would have been impressed at such ruthless authority.

Above "What's '*Veni, vidi, vici*' in Latin? Anyone?

THE ERA OF CRUYFF

Johan Cruyff's eponymous swivel helped him to make history in 1974, as the first man to retain the Ballon d'Or title. It was the third time the Dutchman had received the award, another then-record, during an era in which there was no doubt about the identity of the world's best player.

Cruyff (inset) served as the on-field conductor for manager Rinus Michels' Total Football symphony, first with Ajax and then the Netherlands. The visionary forward was first crowned in 1971 after inspiring Ajax to European Cup final glory over Panathinaikos – the first of three consecutive continental triumphs for the Amsterdam giants.

Cruyff's double in the middle final, a 2-0 win against Inter in Rotterdam, would probably have earned him a second consecutive Ballon d'Or had it not been for West Germany's success at Euro 72, ensuring the top three was a German affair – Franz Beckenbauer beating Gerd Muller and Gunter Netzer.



It returned to Cruyff thanks to his 1973 European Cup victory, though, in a year when he also joined Barcelona. El Salvador led the Catalans to the La Liga title in his first season, but it was his performances for the Dutch at the 1974 World Cup – including *that* turn against Sweden – that delivered his third Ballon d'Or, even if team euphoria eluded the Oranje in the Munich final.

WEAH WINS AND REST OF WORLD FOLLOWS...

By the mid-1990s, European football had become a global community, with icons from South America, Africa and beyond lighting up the continent's top leagues. How, thought some, could such players as Diego Maradona lead Napoli to Scudetto or UEFA Cup glory and not be eligible to win the Ballon d'Or? How could Zico and Roger Milla dazzle at World Cups staged in Europe, yet not qualify for its biggest individual prize?

By 1995, the time had come, felt *France Football*, to open up the Ballon d'Or. From then on, any man on the planet could be nominated for the gong, as long as they played in a European league. The rest of the world certainly made up for lost time, with three non-European winners over the ensuing five years, including 1995 itself.

That first recipient was George Weah – or Mr President as he should now be called – whose performances for PSG throughout 1994-95 brought a Coupe de France and Coupe de la Ligue, and ousted Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-finals. It earned the Liberian a move to Milan and made him the only African to win a Ballon d'Or – Sadio Mané came second in 2022.

A bevy of Brazilian stars succeeded Weah – Ronaldo in 1997 (and after his World Cup heroics in 2002), Rivaldo in '99, Ronaldinho in 2005 and Kaka in 2007. There was also a diminutive Argentine who accumulated a few, but more on him a little bit later. Since the rule switch, on 14 occasions from a possible 28 have non-Europeans bagged the honour as the continent's best.

Which begs the question: just how many non-Europeans were robbed of the chance to win a Ballon d'Or before 1995? *France Football* actually published a historical re-evaluation of their prize back in 2016 – Pele would have been a seven-time Ballon d'Or champion, snatching the award away from Raymond Kopa in 1958, naturalised Spaniard Alfredo Di Stefano in 1959, Luis Suarez in 1960, Omar Sivori in 1961, Lev Yashin in 1963, Denis Law in 1964 and Gerd Muller in 1970. That's greedy, really.

Maradona would have nabbed it twice (from Igor Belanov in 1986 and Lothar Matthaus in 1990), while Garrincha would have taken it from Josef Masopust in 1962, Mario Kempes would have won it instead of Kevin Keegan in 1978 and Romario would have nicked it off Hristo Stoichkov in 1994. Good luck to them trying to get their hands on the trophy, though: if they had knocked on the door of the winner's house, attempting to repossess the prize, that Ballon d'Or would have been stuck where the sun doesn't shine.



OPEN TO NON-EUROPEAN PLAYERS FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE 1995 BALLON D'OR WAS WON BY WEAH

CHAMPION TO CHARLTON ATHLETIC

Allan Simonsen's strike against Liverpool in the 1977 European Cup Final capped off a standout year for the 5ft 5in Borussia Monchengladbach striker. While the Foals ultimately fell short, they still had the Bundesliga title to celebrate, courtesy of the goals and guile of their great Dane.

Incredibly, five years later and poised to turn 30, Simonsen was playing in the English Second Division. After netting the winner in the 1979 UEFA Cup Final, he had moved to Barcelona, where his goals helped to clinch a Copa del Rey and the 1982 Cup Winners' Cup. In the latter final, Simonsen became the only footballer in history to score in the showpieces of the European Cup, UEFA Cup and Cup Winners' Cup, but he found himself exiting Catalonia five months on.

Enraged by Barça's decision to sign Diego Maradona – with Bernd Schuster already at the club and only two foreigners allowed in a La Liga starting line-up – he was demoted to backup. Both Real Madrid and Tottenham displayed interest, but Charlton landed the superstar for £324,000 – double the fee the Blaugrana had forked out three years earlier. Claiming he wanted to, er, "try something new", Simonsen set about tormenting second-tier defences, scoring nine goals in 16 appearances. The Addicks soon realised they couldn't afford his massive wages and flogged him to Danish outfit Vejle. He still finished third in the 1983 Ballon d'Or voting. ▸



MESSI VS RONALDO

When Brazilian midfielder Kaka took the Ballon d'Or prize in December 2007, few could have foreseen the end of an era – a period when anyone, it seemed, could win football's biggest individual honour.

As the Brazilian stood beaming with his gong, no player since Marco van Basten, 18 years previously, had retained it. But things were about to change. Alongside Kaka on the podium that night were a 22-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, 20. In the coming decade, their duopoly would ride roughshod over the award.

Ronaldo struck first, smashing 42 goals in all competitions in 2007-08 as Manchester United won a Premier League and Champions League double. Messi responded in 2009, collecting his first Ballon d'Or after inspiring Barcelona to a stellar sextuple of La Liga, Champions League, Copa del Rey, Spanish Super Cup, UEFA Super Cup and (later that December) Club World Cup. That Champions League final proved the only time the pair went head-to-head in a European showpiece, the Argentine nodding home in a 2-0 win.

A plethora of face-offs followed in La Liga, elevating El Clasico and the Ballon d'Or to almost gladiatorial status and increasing the latter award's profile exponentially. In an era when debates raged about which of the duo was best, the annual Ballon d'Or came closest to offering an answer.

Messi won comfortably in 2010, 2011 and 2012, becoming the first player to pocket four Ballons d'Or, and in consecutive years to boot.

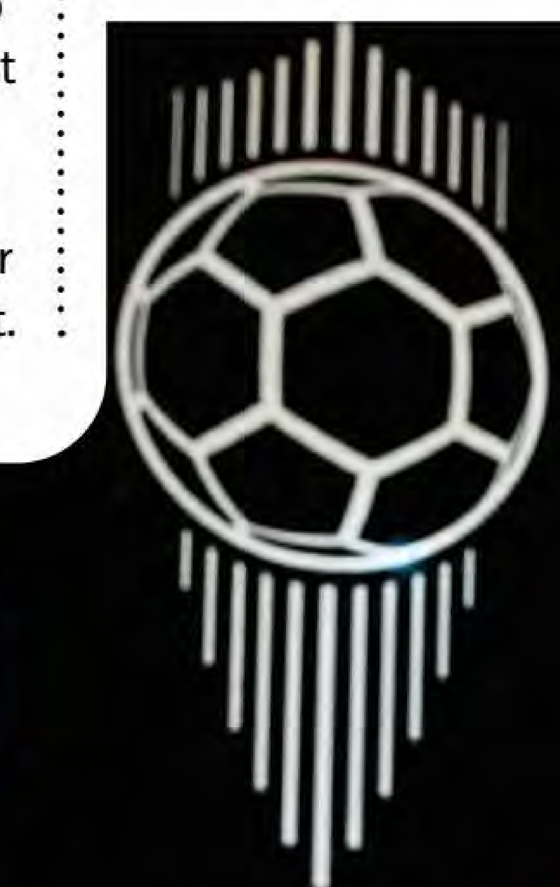
Ronaldo's 2013 reply was the closest contest in the rivalry's history – Cristiano recorded 28 per cent of the vote to Leo's 25 per cent – over a six-year period when the award was held in partnership with FIFA, before *France Football* went it alone again from 2016.

Ronaldo was actually outscored by Messi in 2012-13 and didn't win any major silverware – Franck Ribery was the favourite to triumph, having guided Bayern Munich to the treble. That was until the Portuguese's hat-trick in a dramatic World Cup play-off tussle with Zlatan Ibrahimovic. Voting had closed days earlier, but FIFA reopened it 24 hours after Ronaldo's heroics, insisting they hadn't had enough eligible ballots.

Thereafter, their respective Champions League victories meant that Ronaldo won it again in 2014, 2016 and 2017 (reinforced by glory at Euro 2016), while Messi prevailed in 2015. Luka Modric briefly broke the spell in 2018, but the Argentine wrestled the trophy back in 2019 and 2021.

Following World Cup success, Messi won the Ballon d'Or for an eighth and likely final time. The Messi-Ronaldo era is coming to an end, but it changed European football's most prestigious prize forever.

Below "Look, *FFT*, I've won two more of these since this"





THE MESSI-RONALDO ERA HAS FOREVER CHANGED EUROPEAN FOOTBALL'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS PRIZE



PAPIN: FARMER'S LEAGUE WINNER

The Ballon d'Or may be organised by a French magazine, but it's not easy to win one while actually plying your trade in la Republique.

Jean-Pierre Papin (above) was able to manage it though, after 36 goals in all competitions led Marseille to league glory and the European Cup final in 1990-91. Other French top-flight stars had come close: Raymond Kopa (Reims 1959), Alain Giresse (Bordeaux 1982) and Jean Tigana (Bordeaux 1984) each finished second, but a Ligue 1 medal has rarely hit hard with voters, even prior to recent Farmer's League jibes.

Not that it has stopped individuals travelling there in search of recognition. "I want to win the Ballon d'Or," said Barcelona ace Neymar in 2017, ahead of him joining PSG. The aim was clear: step out of Lionel Messi's shadow.

The curse of Ligue 1 had the opposite effect, however. The Brazilian filled his trophy cabinet with domestic pots, but never finished higher than third in the Ballon d'Or standings in his six-year stay. "People always try to put on my resume that I have to win the Ballon d'Or – so far, this hasn't happened, but it's not something that worries me," he said in 2022, frantically deleting his previous quote from Wikipedia.

Until 2023's award, Kylian Mbappe hadn't even made the top three. The secret to winning the Ballon d'Or is the thing that was holding Neymar back in the first place – just be Messi, who secured a seventh award mere months after joining PSG in 2021.

AND THE NOMINEES ARE...



The only British clubs to produce a Ballon d'Or winner remain Blackpool, Liverpool and Manchester United, but 26 others have had a player nominated.

Chelsea have seen 58 stars put forward without one ever winning – Frank Lampard came closest, on the podium with Liverpool's Steven Gerrard in 2005.

West Ham have Bobby Moore, Sir Geoff Hurst and Martin Peters to thank for the bulk of their 15 selections, although Dimitri Payet made the cut in 2016. Tony Yeboah, Harry Kewell and Rio Ferdinand are among Leeds' baker's dozen, otherwise consisting of Don Revie disciples. Peter Shilton (twice) and Colin Todd got the nod for Derby; Shilts was also a contender four times at Nottingham Forest, along with Archie Gemmill, Trevor Francis, Viv Anderson and Des Walker. David Platt and Paul McGrath had two nominations apiece while at Aston Villa, for whom World Cup winner Emiliano Martinez featured on this year's 30-strong list. Bagging the 1981 UEFA Cup was enough for Ipswich duo John Wark and Frans Thijssen.

At Celtic, Henrik Larsson and Shunsuke Nakamura joined Packie Bonner, Paul McStay plus Lisbon Lions Jimmy Johnstone (thrice) and Tommy Gemmell (twice). At Rangers, Brian Laudrup was lauded after fellow Ibrox legends John Greig, Ally McCoist and Oleksiy Mikhailichenko. Goalkeeper Theo Snelders followed Gordon Strachan as an Aberdeen inclusion, the latter coming fourth in 1983.

Wolves' trio of nominations were all for Billy Wright, who finished as high as second in 1957. Johnny Haynes, third in 1961, was selected three times thriving at Fulham, who also saw loanee Junichi Inamoto included in 2002. Alan Shearer was Blackburn's sole candidate and earned recognition on two other occasions at Newcastle, who have been represented by Philippe Albert and Michael Owen as well. Gordon Banks nabbed both of Stoke's shouts, while Burnley and England keeper Colin McDonald was up for the award in the year of the 1958 World Cup, three seasons before Jimmy McIlroy steered the Clarets to the European Cup quarter-finals.

Sunderland's two nominations were more disparate – after Jim Baxter was picked in 1965, it would take over four decades for another Black Cat to receive a letter in the post. Three goals at the 2010 World Cup helped Asamoah Gyan to finish 18th in that year's vote – rumour has it that Luis Suarez leapt on stage to celebrate Gyan's failure to land the gong and had to be dragged away.

Middlesbrough can boast one Ballon d'Or hopeful in the form of Fabrizio Ravanelli – he moved to the Riverside just after scoring in Juventus' 1996 Champions League Final triumph against Ajax – as can QPR, with Irishman Don Givens honoured for netting 21 goals in all competitions in 1974-75. Sixteen years earlier, shot-stopper Ken Jones was shortlisted during a spell at Scunthorpe in the second tier, having appeared for Wales at the 1958 World Cup. Another Welshman, 36-year-old Ivor Allchurch, even made the Ballon d'Or roll call as a Third Division player at Swansea in 1965 – en route to becoming his country's joint record goalscorer, he hit the winner in World Cup qualifying against the mighty USSR.

Dean Saunders figures in the group of other Welshmen nominated – the Liverpool forward amassed three votes in 1991, two more than Gary Pallister, edging the pair in front of Paul Scholes' overall tally. The Manchester United maestro was a Ballon d'Or entrant five times in his career, but didn't attract a single vote – if only they'd let Scholesy superfan Zinedine Zidane have a say, he'd have been flying up that leaderboard.

NOMINATIONS BY CLUB

Man United	106
Liverpool	67
Chelsea	58
Arsenal	47
Man City	40
Tottenham	29
West Ham	15
Leeds	13
Everton	10
Celtic	9
Nott'm Forest	8
Aston Villa	5
Fulham	4
Newcastle	4
Rangers	4
Derby	3
Leicester	3
Wolves	3
Aberdeen	2
Blackpool	2
Burnley	2
Ipswich	2
Stoke	2
Sunderland	2
Blackburn	1
Middlesbrough	1
QPR	1
Scunthorpe	1
Swansea	1

"I'M SORRY, WHO?!"

SOKOL KUSHTA

Today, it seems far-fetched to imagine that an Albanian, playing for an Albanian club, would be nominated for the Ballon d'Or. It happened in 1987: the Flamurtari striker even picked up a vote, putting him level with Glenn Hoddle and Rudi Voller.

YOUNIS MAHMOUD

If Scholes wasn't irked enough by totalling zero Ballon d'Or votes during his career, he was beaten by Mahmoud in 2007. Playing for Al Gharafa in Qatar, the forward got a nomination, then a couple of votes, after guiding Iraq to a first ever Asian Cup title.

30 BEST BRITISH CLUB SIDES EVER!

From underdog stories to treble triumphs, *FFT* ranks the most remarkable teams to emerge from these shores

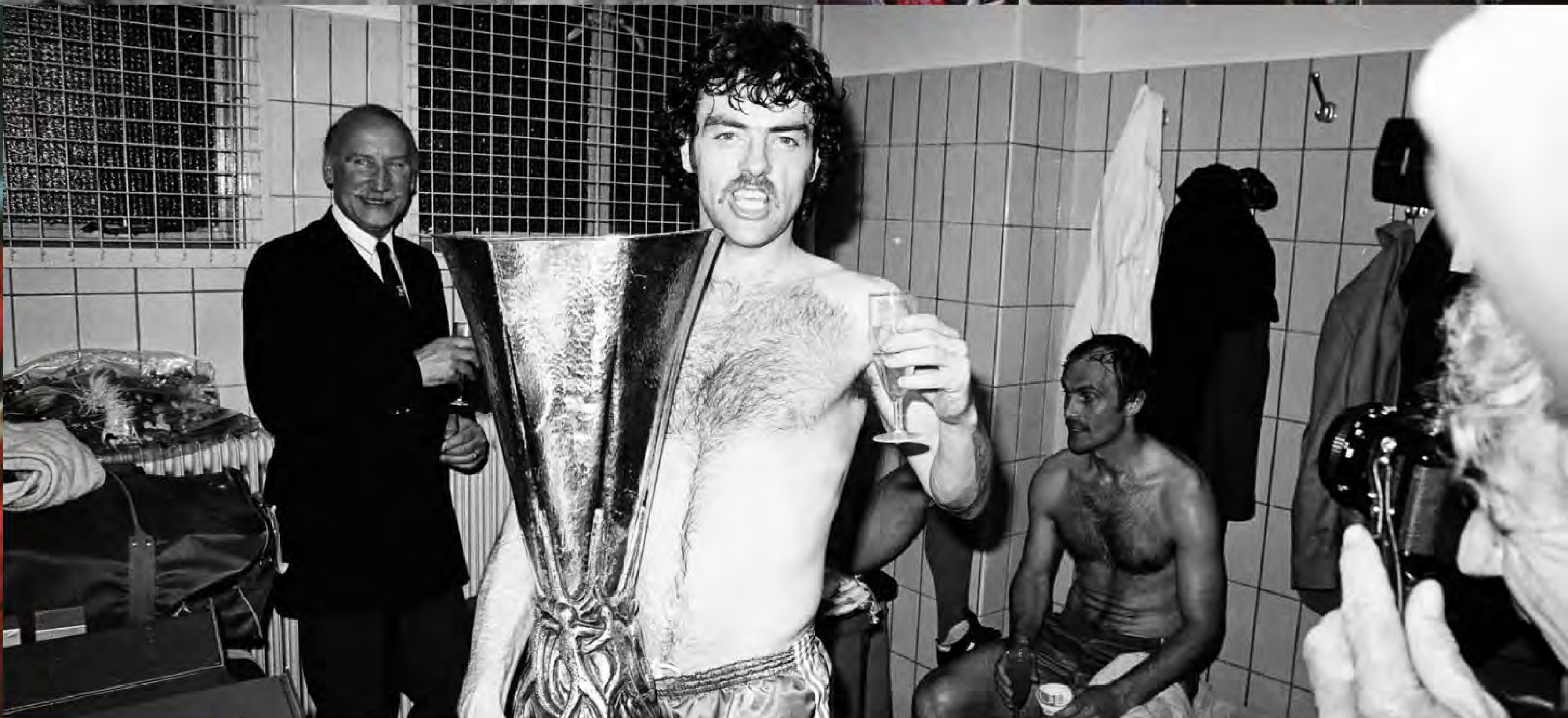
Words Tom Hancock











30 WEST HAM 1964-65

Helped by future World Cup heroes Bobby Moore, Martin Peters and Geoff Hurst, the Hammers captured the Cup Winners' Cup. **HIGHLIGHT** Alan Sealey's double as Ron Greenwood's side defeated 1860 Munich at Wembley, bookending a season in which they shared the Charity Shield with Liverpool.

29 ABERDEEN 1982-85

Under the authoritarian guide of a young Alex Ferguson, the Dons did the unthinkable – ousting the Old Firm to become Scotland's dominant club and lift a European trophy. **HIGHLIGHT** After toppling Bayern Munich en route, Aberdeen's stunning victory over Real Madrid delivered the 1983 Cup Winners' Cup.

Top West Ham's Bobby Moore gets a taste for lifting big trophies at Wembley. Same again next year?

28 RANGERS 2020-21

Nine years after having to start again in the fourth tier, Rangers became champions of Scotland once more – under Steven Gerrard's guidance, the Gers didn't lose a single game, finishing 25 points clear of neighbours Celtic. **HIGHLIGHT** Triumphing 2-0 at Celtic Park in October, during a 15-game winning streak.

27 CELTIC 2016-17

Four years before Rangers repeated the trick, Brendan Rodgers' Celtic went through a full league season unbeaten themselves, with 106 points – adding the Scottish Cup and League Cup to complete a domestic treble. **HIGHLIGHT** Winning 5-1 at Rangers – their biggest ever victory over their foes at Ibrox.

26 LIVERPOOL 2000-01

With Michael Owen and Steven Gerrard complementing the experience of Gary McAllister, the Reds recorded their own treble under Gerard Houllier – clinching the FA Cup, the League Cup and the UEFA Cup. **HIGHLIGHT** A 5-4 victory over Alaves in perhaps the greatest ever UEFA Cup final.

25 IPSWICH 1980-81

Ipswich put themselves on the European map by lifting the UEFA Cup under Bobby Robson. Champions of England 19 years earlier, they almost won the league again, too – finishing four points behind Aston Villa. **HIGHLIGHT** The 3-0 win over AZ Alkmaar in the UEFA Cup final first leg at Portman Road.













24 BLACKBURN 1994-95

Manchester United had a near monopoly on the Premier League in the '90s – backed by Jack Walker though, Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton fired Kenny Dalglish's men to glory. **HIGHLIGHT** Winning the title by the skin of their teeth: Blackburn lost at Anfield on the last day, but Manchester United only drew.

23 WOLVES 1957-59

Inspired by 1957 Ballon d'Or runner-up Billy Wright and goal ace Jimmy Murray, Stan Cullis' Wolves celebrated back-to-back titles, surpassing 100 league goals in each year. **HIGHLIGHT** Wolves beat Aston Villa four times out of four across the two seasons, including a 4-0 hammering at Molineux.

22 LEEDS 1973-75

Champions in 1974, then European Cup runners-up the next year, the mid-70s were heady days for Leeds. The latter came after Brian Clough's infamous 44-day tenure – Jimmy Armfield stepped in to replace him. **HIGHLIGHT** Winning the 1974 title, five points ahead of second-placed Liverpool.

21 PRESTON 1888-89

Preston were the Football League's first champions, also bagging the FA Cup. With 18 victories and four draws from 22 games, it would be the English top flight's only invincible campaign for the next 115 years. **HIGHLIGHT** Beating Notts County in January to win the title with three matches to spare.

Top left "Man United drew 1-1 at West Ham? That's very poor, they're so much better than that"

20 ASTON VILLA 1980-82

Villa's finest hour came in 1982, when Peter Withe's goal beat Bayern in the European Cup final, a year after they'd won the league. In between, boss Ron Saunders defected to rivals Birmingham, replaced by Tony Barton. **HIGHLIGHT** Sub keeper Nigel Spink's heroics in the final, after Jimmy Rimmer's injury.

19 TOTTENHAM 1960-61

Bill Nicholson's charges were the first team to win the Double in the 20th century – Bobby Smith was top scorer with 33 goals as Spurs finished a full eight points clear of runners-up Sheffield Wednesday atop the First Division. **HIGHLIGHT** Defeating Leicester 2-0 at Wembley to clinch the club's third FA Cup.





Above Gunners greats: Keown, Anelka, Adams, Wright, Seaman, and Christopher Wreh?! Hmm...

18 LEICESTER 2015-16

Title winners at pre-season odds of 5,000/1, Leicester wrote one of the finest underdog stories in sporting history. Claudio Ranieri's side of Jamie Vardy, Riyad Mahrez, N'Golo Kante et al lost just three league games. **HIGHLIGHT** Wes Morgan lifting the trophy, after Andrea Bocelli sang *Nessun Dorma*.

17 EVERTON 1984-85

Howard Kendall's Toffees finished 13 points ahead of Liverpool, won their first European silverware in the form of the Cup Winners' Cup, and reached the FA Cup final, too. **HIGHLIGHT** Dominating Rapid Vienna in the Cup Winners' Cup final, thanks to goals from Andy Gray, Trevor Steven and Kevin Sheedy.

16 ARSENAL 1997-98

Arsene Wenger's appointment as Arsenal manager was met with scepticism, but that vanished when the Frenchman guided the Gunners to their first Premier League title, also lifting the FA Cup to make it a Double. **HIGHLIGHT** The May victory over Everton, with a legendary goal from Tony Adams.

15 HUDDERSFIELD 1923-26

Herbert Chapman was the mastermind as Huddersfield snared two consecutive First Division titles – he then headed to Arsenal, so Cecil Potter helped the Terriers become the first club ever to win three in a row. **HIGHLIGHT** The title in 1924 – their goal average was just 0.024 higher than Cardiff's.

14 RANGERS 1992-93

European Golden Shoe winner Ally McCoist and strike partner Mark Hateley scored 78 between them as the Gers stormed to a domestic treble, also coming within one game of the Champions League final. **HIGHLIGHT** Toppling Leeds in Europe, in what was billed as the "Battle of Britain".

13 MAN UNITED 2006-09

In 2009, Alex Ferguson's side achieved what had been on the cards for years: equalling Liverpool's record of 18 titles. Inspired by Cristiano Ronaldo, they also beat Chelsea to win the Champions League final in 2008. **HIGHLIGHT** Edwin van der Sar's save from Nicolas Anelka to secure European glory.









Above "Smile Bryan, even Middlesbrough might give you a job after this"

12 LIVERPOOL 2018-20

Jurgen Klopp's side could taste that elusive first Premier League title – and finally got it in 2020, amassing 99 points. The previous year, they'd missed out with 97, but won the Champions League. Not a bad consolation. **HIGHLIGHT** The end of Liverpool's 30-year wait for a title, as Man City lost at Chelsea.

11 NOTT'M FOREST 1977-80

After promotion to the top flight in 1977, Forest became English champions in 1978. Securing entry to the European Cup, Brian Clough's side won that in 1979 – then again in 1980. Yes, all of that did really happen. **HIGHLIGHT** Winning a first European Cup, thanks to Trevor Francis' goal against Malmo.

10 MAN UNITED 1992-94

The Premier League's early days belonged to the Red Devils, who ended their 26-year wait for a title in its inaugural campaign, then did the Double a season later, aided by Ryan Giggs, Eric Cantona, Peter Schmeichel & Co. **HIGHLIGHT** Bryan Robson lifting the trophy in 1993. Finally, they were champions again.

09 CHELSEA 2004-06

In 2003, Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea – within two seasons they'd won the league for the first time in 50 years, thanks to Jose Mourinho. Conceding only 15 goals, they shipped just 22 as they won it again in 2006. **HIGHLIGHT** Frank Lampard's brace to seal the Premier League title at Bolton in 2005.

08 MAN CITY 2017-19

In 2018, Pep Guardiola's City became the first team to reach 100 points in an English top-flight campaign – they then recorded 98 in 2019, adding the FA Cup and League Cup for a domestic treble. Not bad at all... **HIGHLIGHT** Becoming centurions with a last-gap win at Southampton in 2018.

07 LIVERPOOL 1975-78

The 1976-77 season brought Bob Paisley's Reds a second successive title – and their first ever European Cup, against Borussia Monchengladbach in Rome. A year later, they retained the trophy against Bruges. **HIGHLIGHT** Their historic first European Cup success – a 3-1 win at Stadio Olimpico.













06 ARSENAL 2003-04

It didn't seem like it would ever be done again, but 115 years after Preston's exploits, the Gunners completed another unbeaten campaign in an altogether tougher era. They'll forever be known as the Invincibles. **HIGHLIGHT** Clinching the title at White Hart Lane – could it have been any more perfect?

05 MAN UNITED 1967-68

Ten years on from the Munich air disaster, and having previously lost two European Cup semi-finals, Matt Busby's side finally became continental champions, and at Wembley too. **HIGHLIGHT** The glorious European Cup final against Benfica – Bobby Charlton bagged a brace; George Best also netted a fine goal.

Above Fergie, finally content... for about 30 seconds, then back to dishing out hairdryers

04 CELTIC 1966-67

Completing an extraordinary quadruple, Celtic became champions of Scotland and Europe, also lifting both domestic cups. Jock Stein's Lisbon Lions saw off Inter to become the first British club to win the European Cup. **HIGHLIGHT** Victory in Lisbon – every Celtic player was born within 30 miles of Glasgow.

03 MAN UNITED 1998-99

Football, bloody hell. No English side had done the Treble until Alex Ferguson's men pocketed the Premier League and FA Cup, then defeated Bayern Munich in incredible fashion in the Champions League final. **HIGHLIGHT** Goals from Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer stunned Bayern.

02 LIVERPOOL 1980-84

Featuring the ice-cold finishing of Ian Rush and the genius of Kenny Dalglish, the Reds hoovered up two European Cups and three league titles in the space of four seasons. **HIGHLIGHT** Shootout glory over Roma in their own stadium in the 1984 European Cup Final, aided by Bruce Grobbelaar's jelly legs.

01 MAN CITY 2022-23

City were already a special team, then Erling Haaland took them to new levels. Winning the league and the FA Cup wasn't new – battering Bayern Munich and Real Madrid, then beating Inter to secure the Treble, was. **HIGHLIGHT** Finally winning the Champions League, the one thing that had eluded them.



THE PUPPET-MASTER PRINCE

Xabi Alonso has emerged as Europe's next top boss after putting Bayer Leverkusen in contention for (and winning) a maiden Bundesliga crown. Having learned under Pep, Jose, Carlo and Rafa, how long before the apprentice from an unlikely coaching hotbed rejoins a giant?

Words Ed McCambridge

Nestled in the foothills of the Basque province of Gipuzkoa, northern Spain, lies the small, sun-kissed town of Tolosa. There, along the tranquil banks of the River Oria, thousands of people flock each year to learn more about the peculiar art of Basque puppetry. From processional giants to wooden marionettes, Tolosa's puppetry centre is home to countless lifelike figurines; its local residents committed to keeping an ancient tradition alive.

Fittingly, the town's most famous son made a name for himself as a string-puller of an entirely different kind. Xabi Alonso's ability to make those around him dance to his own rhythm was feted throughout a decorated 18-year playing career that took him from nearby San Sebastian to the grandest stages of Liverpool, Madrid and Munich. Accolades included four league titles, two Champions Leagues, two European Championships and, biggest of all, the World Cup in 2010.

As a pupil, Alonso studied under masters of the modern game – the only man to have counted Rafael Benitez, Jose Mourinho, Carlo Ancelotti and Pep Guardiola as mentors, not to mention John Toshack, Vicente del Bosque and Luis Aragones. His father, Periko, was a similarly gifted midfield operator, winning La Liga three times, twice with Real Sociedad and once at Barcelona. At every opportunity, Xabi endeavoured to learn.

"I tried to be curious about the manager's work," revealed the Spaniard. "It was never just about playing. I was always trying to ask questions and be close to them – I had that desire to coach already."

It was never in doubt, as soon as the curtain came down on his playing career at Bayern Munich in 2017, that the string-pulling would continue in the dugout. "I'm sure that when he hangs up his boots, he'll become a great coach," then Real Madrid boss Mourinho said in 2010. "He reminds me of Pep Guardiola as a player – already a coach on the pitch."

Guardiola himself echoed the sentiment. "He has a curiosity to understand the game," declared Alonso's one-time Bayern gaffer. "He knew during the week what we had to do to win the next game. He will be a manager and he will be good."

Pep is seldom wrong. After a season's rest, some family time and indulging his passion for motorbikes – "I've had one for years, but it's written into most footballers' contracts that you can't ride them," he told *FFT* shortly before retirement – Alonso's first coaching role was a success. While finishing his UEFA badges, he guided Real Madrid Under-14s to a league title. "It's their victory, not mine," he said like a proud *padre*. "They get the credit."

Persistent talk regarding a promotion to Los Blancos' Castilla reserve team ended in the summer of 2019, when Alonso accepted an offer to boss alma mater Real Sociedad B. "At first you don't know how it's going to be," he explained after leading La Real's reserves to fifth place – just outside the play-off spots in Spain's third tier – in his first campaign at the helm. "But then I got caught up in it all. It's like an itch and then you say, 'What the f**k, I like this!'"

Alonso led his side to the Segunda Division B title in his second season, returning them to Spain's second tier for the first time in 59 years. Inevitably, the rumour mill churned.

"I want to take things slowly and not force them," Alonso insisted in 2021. "These first few steps in San Sebastian, my home, where I started my playing career, make sense for me. I still have much to learn."

The Spaniard's third year as Sanse supremo featured a tough lesson indeed; his starlets relegated at the first time of asking. Dejected, he announced his decision to leave the club in May 2022.

Despite that setback, Alonso was still linked with top-flight jobs across Europe, though it wasn't until last term was already underway that a concrete proposal emerged.





"I'VE TAKEN THIS STEP BECAUSE IT JUST FELT RIGHT. WE'LL PLAY MODERN AND INTENSE FOOTBALL"

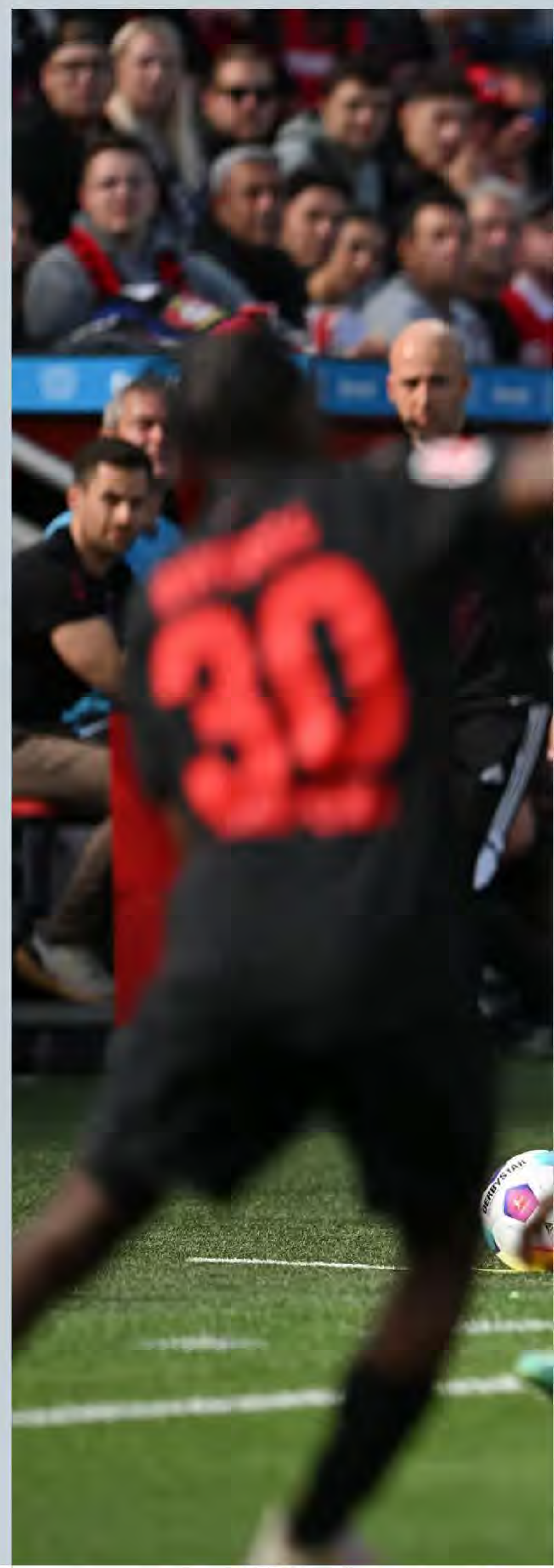
Above "I suppose getting kung-fu kicked by Nigel de Jong was worth it" **Top** Alonso lifted the European Cup in 2005 as part of a glittering career

"A PRODUCT OF HIS EDUCATION"

A dozen games into the 2022-23 campaign in all competitions, Bayer Leverkusen's board bit the bullet. Gerardo Seoane had steered Die Werkself to Champions League qualification that May, but a dismal beginning to the new campaign saw the Swiss boss' credit deplete: suffering an early DFB-Pokal exit to third-tier Elversberg, winning only one of eight league games and starting languidly in Europe. A 2-0 loss against Porto in the Champions League, leaving his team joint-bottom of their group, proved the final straw.

"Alonso took us all by surprise," *Sport Bild*'s chief Leverkusen reporter Phillip Arens tells *FFT* of Seoane's replacement on October 5. "We weren't aware that [sporting director] Simon Rolfes had been secretly sounding him out for weeks already.

"It was seen as a significant risk. He'd been a wonderful player and knew German football from his time with Bayern, but he was hugely inexperienced. Leverkusen were 17th and in a relegation battle."



Legendary Leverkusen manager Klaus Toppmoller, who led the club to an infamous anti-treble – runners-up in the league, cup and Champions League – in 2001-02, was surprised the role even appealed. "Alonso had been building a reputation in Spain and the obvious move would have been to take charge of a La Liga club," the 72-year-old tells *FFT*. "Leverkusen represented a risk for him as well. A fantastic challenge, but a risk."

Alonso returned to Germany to immense hullabaloo, as newspapers, podcasts and television networks assessing his credentials. TV channel Sport 1's *Doppelpass* panel show dedicated an hour to Leverkusen's coaching change, with Stefan Effenberg opining "big names don't guarantee success". The Bayern luminary highlighted Wolfsburg's disastrous 2021 appointment of Mark van Bommel – the Dutchman lasted less than five months.

Alonso handled his first press conference with trademark composure. "I've taken this step because it just felt right," he said, sitting alongside Rolfes. "We'll play modern football that's intense both with and without the ball. I don't look at the table."

It wasn't only what he said that impressed. "I informed the club that we'd be happy to conduct the conference in English if it made Alonso more comfortable," recalls journalist Arens. "But he insisted on German, as he has in every interview since that day. German isn't an easy language and he's done remarkably well to communicate so clearly."

Alonso's first on-field test came three days later: a relegation six-pointer against Schalke. Leverkusen secured only their second league win of the season courtesy of a 4-0 drubbing, but the new-manager bounce wouldn't last.

Eintracht Frankfurt routed 10-man Bayer 5-1 in Alonso's second game, while fixtures three and four against Wolfsburg and RB Leipzig yielded a solitary point.

"After he'd been in the role for a few weeks, I asked him what the most important thing he'd witnessed was – he said that first defeat against Frankfurt," says Arens. "He knew then that things had to change."

Alonso jettisoned the 4-2-3-1 formation prevalent during Seoane's tenure in favour of a 3-4-3, and also demanded fast, attacking football with more emphasis on possession. "Coming in and changing a team's tactical blueprint is always a risk," says ex-Leverkusen coach Toppmoller. "Alonso's players weren't used to a back three, but he saw it as the best way to get results."

The switch soon took effect, as Leverkusen tore Union Berlin apart in their next league encounter, triumphing 5-0. Victories against Köln and Stuttgart followed in their final two games before the World Cup.

Three successes on the spin had propelled Leverkusen to 12th in the standings, so Qatar 2022 was an unwelcome interruption. Those not flying out to the Middle East, including the coach, seized the opportunity for some time off, with only injured players required to visit the training ground.

In the latter group was youngster Florian Wirtz, the playmaker slowly returning to full fitness after an anterior cruciate ligament injury. Even at 19 years of age, Wirtz would have been a shoo-in for Hansi Flick's Germany squad had he not been sidelined, and was understandably upset. Yet the international break helped to create a bond between the teenager and his new gaffer.

"Alonso turned up at the training ground one afternoon just to catch up with his staff," remembers Arens, in attendance that day to offer readers fitness updates. "He spotted the players doing a light workout and spoke to them for a moment before heading back inside. A short while later, he reappeared in a training kit.

"He took part in the session," smiles Arens. "For a young player like Wirtz, that was a big deal. It set a brilliant example. That gesture ▸

Below "Look, if you want me to show you how it's done, lads, I don't mind..."



said, 'I'm here for you, even on my day off – we're all in this together'."

If inspiring Wirtz had been the manager's clandestine plan that afternoon, it worked. The attacking midfielder returned to action in the first game back after the winter break, playing the final 16 minutes in a 3-2 away victory over Borussia Monchengladbach. He then provided an assist in his first start, a 2-0 triumph at home to Bochum that extended Die Werkself's winning streak to five matches and moved them up to eighth.

By that point, Alonso's tactical tweaks were increasingly conspicuous. Bayer dominated possession, shifted the ball around quickly in the opposition's half and made the pitch as wide as possible in a bid to create openings for pacy forwards, such as Moussa Diaby and the deep-lying Wirtz. Off the ball, Leverkusen looked well-drilled, extremely hard-working and knew exactly what was required in every single phase of play.

"It was instantly clear that he'd benefitted from a tremendous coaching education," adds Leverkusen favourite Toppmoller. "In possession, he wanted his team to be brave, open up the field with wide players and play through pockets of space, like Guardiola.

"When defending, his teams are compact and disciplined. They regroup in their own half and press deep, like a Mourinho side. He has a calmness, a likeability, like Ancelotti, and an understanding of when to make changes, how to combat an opponent's strengths and how to prey on weaknesses, like Benitez. He's his own man, but a product of his education."

After a February wobble, losing at Augsburg and then at home to Mainz, Leverkusen took a staggering 20 points from the next 24 on offer, in a run which included wins against Alonso's former club Bayern and RB Leipzig. So dramatic was their turnaround in fortunes, the official Bundesliga website published an alternative league table including only those matchdays since Alonso replaced Seoane. According to that metric, the Spaniard's side were the fourth best in Germany.

They dazzled on the continent, too. After dropping down from the Champions League into the Europa League knockout stages, they vanquished Monaco, Ferencvaros and Union Saint-Gilloise to tee-up an enticing semi-final tie against Roma – managed by Alonso's old Madrid boss Mourinho.



"HE'S MADE THE CLUB BELIEVE. I HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THE XABI ALONSO EFFECT"

"I love Jose, I learned so much from him," the younger coach said prior to the first leg in Rome. "It will be a special occasion for me." The pair embraced at the Stadio Olimpico, before master bested apprentice 1-0. In the return leg at the BayArena, Leverkusen took the game to their opponents, boasting 72 per cent possession and registering 23 shots to the Italians' sole effort. It ended 0-0 – classic Mourinho. The same couldn't be said, though, for the Special One's post-game comments.

"I don't like celebrating in the face of a guy who has lost if I have a relationship with him," claimed the Portuguese, possibly suffering from a kind of acute amnesia at the time. "Xabi is a friend."

Above "And there was me thinking we were pals, Xabi"

The narrow Roma defeat ended any hope of silverware, but Leverkusen sealed a sixth-placed finish in the league. It represented an emphatic recovery.

THE END OF NEVERKUSEN?

Ahead of the current season, Alonso outlined three areas for Leverkusen's recruitment team to focus on: a specialist left-wing-back, forwards to replace the Aston Villa-bound Diaby and sidelined Patrik Schick – ruled out until November – plus a number six capable of dictating tempo.

Benfica's Alex Grimaldo arrived on a free transfer to help address the first issue, while a combined £25 million was splashed on strikers Victor Boniface – the 2022-23 Europa League's joint-top scorer, who struck against Leverkusen for Union Saint-Gilloise – and experienced Monchengladbach man Jonas Hofmann. The final piece of the jigsaw was the most eye-catching, though.

"Arsenal's Granit Xhaka had been scouted a year earlier but was too expensive," recalls Arens. "They were able to go back and close a deal last summer. Xhaka said that working under Alonso was a key factor in his decision to return to Germany.

"You'll also notice the age of many of the players brought in. Xhaka and Hofmann are 31, and Grimaldo is 28. Alonso felt his side was too inexperienced the year before. He intentionally increased his squad's average age, which is unusual at Bundesliga clubs."

Leverkusen began with three straight wins to rocket to the top of the table, new signing Boniface notching four times to set up an early six-pointer against Bayern, champions in each of the previous 11 campaigns. Alonso rubbished any premature chat of a title tilt, but the game told a different story. His team twice came from behind in a fiery clash at the Allianz Arena, equalising in injury time to snatch a draw. The ensuing bundle in front



GIPUZKOA GAFFERS

The Basque Country has long had a reputation for punching above its weight when it comes to the production of top-flight players.

Take Athletic Bilbao, for example: Spain's third-most successful club in terms of trophies won have only ever fielded players from within the greater Basque Country, which (somewhat confusingly) comprises Navarre and the Northern Basque Country in France, too.

The number of elite-level gaffers hailing from Gipuzkoa – a small Basque province about the size of West Sussex – is even more head-spinning. As well as Xabi Alonso – born in Tolosa (above) – there's Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta, Andoni Iraola of Bournemouth and Aston Villa chief Unai Emery, plus Julen Lopetegui and Imanol Alguacil, whose Real Sociedad topped their Champions League group this term.

In fact, Alonso, Arteta and Iraola played together for the same youth side, Antiguoko, once upon a time. If *FFT* didn't already suspect there may be something in the *agua*, we certainly do now.



Above Alonso has endeared himself to all at the BayArena

of the away end suggested Alonso's players saw it as more than "just another test for us", as he'd insisted pre-kick-off.

"He showed himself to be an incredibly shrewd manager that day," says Toppmoller of the Basque. "Not only in the way he set his side up to hit Bayern on the break, but in the way he managed the flow of the game. They were being dominated in the first half, so he introduced Exequiel Palacios to beef up his midfield. That gave Leverkusen a foothold in the game." It was Palacios, too, who scored the equaliser from the penalty spot.

The Bayern draw preceded a run of eight straight Bundesliga victories: Heidenheim, Mainz, Köln, Wolfsburg, Freiburg, Hoffenheim, Union Berlin and Werder Bremen dispatched by a combined scoreline of 24-5. Four games and two successes later, Leverkusen could look back on an unblemished *Hinrunde* (first half of the campaign), including a perfect six wins in their Europa League group and three consecutive DFB-Pokal triumphs.

Alonso's additions had catapulted his side to a whole new level. Boniface posted 24 goal involvements (16 goals, eight assists) in all competitions, Hofmann 15 (seven goals, eight assists) and Grimaldo, a wing-back, 17 (nine goals, eight assists). Ex-Arsenal man Xhaka, meanwhile, was a revelation. No midfielder in the Bundesliga had covered more grass or been more reliable on the ball at the halfway stage of the season. "He's like an additional coach on the pitch," enthused Alonso. "He's the brain of the team."

Those already in the squad last term had also raised their game. German international Jonathan Tah has prospered as the fulcrum of Alonso's back three, right-back Jeremie Frimpong had made more sprints than any other player in the league and Wirtz, now 20, finished the *Hinrunde* among the top three for assists, key passes, dribbles and sprints. By the time the Christmas geese were carved, Leverkusen had collectively averaged more than 60 per cent possession across their 16 Bundesliga matches, conceded fewer goals than anyone else and been outscored only by Bayern, who could count on England captain Harry Kane up front.

Xhaka confirmed that exceptional coaching was behind the team's stellar performances. "Xabi is a proper coach," said the midfielder in December. "He explains things simply and, when possible, he will even show you how he would do it."

Several times this season, videos of Alonso playing defence-splitting passes in training sessions have gone viral. "I still miss playing," he smirked when asked about it in November. "I shouldn't say that, but I do."

With his team performing way beyond all expectations, Alonso's main task has become keeping everyone's feet on the ground. "He's brutally honest with us," said Xhaka. "That's very important. When everyone is praising us, it's not so easy to stay grounded. The coach makes sure we do."

As Leverkusen sat top at the winter break (four points clear of Bayern, who had a game in hand), talk of a maiden Bundesliga crown in the club's history escalated. For Toppmoller, who fell agonisingly short in that 2001-02 season that saw them branded 'Neverkusen', there's no reason why they can't go all the way. "They've absolutely earned their place at the table's summit for much of this season," he proclaims. "It would mean everything to the fans to finally win the league. If Xabi can do it, he will go down in history."

Leverkusen clinched the title in April with Alonso getting his hands on his first top-flight title as a coach, however, his legacy was already assured. "Every home game is sold out and thousands more are going to away matches," reveals Arens. "He's made the club believe once again. I can honestly say, in all my years covering Leverkusen as a reporter, I've never experienced anything quite like the Xabi Alonso effect."

Inevitably, the man himself has had to deal with increasing questions regarding his future – rumours pointed to a clause in his contract that would allow him to leave for one of his old clubs: Liverpool, Real Madrid or Bayern.

Unsurprisingly, those associated with Bayer feel the best option would be to stay beyond his contract, which runs to 2026. While his long-term future is yet to be decided, thankfully for Werkself fans, Alonso dismissed the speculation and in March committed his immediate future to the club. "For a young coach, there's nowhere better at this time," says Toppmoller. "Leverkusen are a club moving in the right direction, the team is his now and the players admire him. I personally think he should stay for a few more seasons and then complete his dream move. But, of course, I'm biased."

Liverpool fans will watch Alonso's situation with keen interest. The Spaniard, who made 210 Reds appearances between 2004 and 2009, has spoken of his deep-rooted love for the club, respect for the departing Jurgen Klopp and desire to return to Anfield one day.

"I've dreamt of that, but I've got to prove myself," he said in 2018, building up to his first coaching role. "My link, commitment and passion with Liverpool is there, so why not?"

Before any of that, Alonso has Leverkusen to concentrate on after writing himself into history as the first man to pilot the club to a *Meisterschale*. After ending Bayern's stranglehold, you can be sure that, just as he did after bagging his debut dugout title with Real Madrid U14s, he'll let his players take the credit.

Those who have witnessed his sensational impact at the BayArena will know the truth, though. It was the string-puller from Tolosa.

ALL HAIL THE KING

It's 20 years since Henrik Larsson brought an end to seven glorious seasons at Celtic, but he remains a legend at Parkhead – and at Barcelona, too. He tells *FourFourTwo* why his time at both clubs still means so much to him

Words Andrew Murray **Interview** Dani Gil

Henrik Larsson's voice betrays him when he talks about Celtic. There's often a seriousness to his clipped counsel during his chat with *FFT*, and he tends to choose his words very carefully. The delivery that he unwittingly reserves for his time in Glasgow is different.

"I played in the UEFA Cup final and in the Champions League," the 52-year-old reminds us, a warm timbre softening his answer. He pauses. "I had seven *wonderful* years at Celtic."

Nearly two decades have passed since Larsson left Paradise for the last time in May 2004, but memories of the forward's guile and instinctive predation remain crisp.

Overcoming a broken leg so bad that he struggled to walk to the toilet, Larsson plundered 242 goals in 313 Hoops appearances, won eight major honours to break Rangers' Scottish Premier League monopoly, and had a starring role in Celtic's first European final for 33 years. Across the 2000-01 campaign alone, he struck 53 club goals in all competitions as the continent's deadliest marksman.

Yet it's the way he made Celtic fans *feel* that mattered most. For a country bred on Buckfast short-term hits, Larsson was a fine wine enjoyed in peak condition. Then, just to prove any 'farmers' league' jibes redundant having dedicated his prime years to Celtic, he won Barcelona a Champions League final ▸

OF KINGS



almost single-handedly, and embarked on a three-month Manchester United cameo so good he melted Alex Ferguson's iron heart.

Depending on your preference, the Swedish forward with 106 senior caps was, to Bhoys fans, either 'The Magnificent 7', 'The King of Kings' or simply 'Ghod'. And when Ronaldinho calls you "my idol", you've clearly done something right...

"I KNOW I AM BLOODY STRONG"

As he joined the youth team of local third-tier side Hogaborg, aged six, Larsson's talent was conspicuous from an early age. By his early teens, however, he struggled for game time due to his diminutive stature. Instead of quitting as many of his peers did, he set about proving his coaches wrong, and when a growth spurt finally hit at the age of 15, size and talent combined for purest alchemy. By 17, he was a first-team regular.

"The thing about Henrik was how bloody stubborn he was," said his first Hogaborg coach, Kenneth Karlsson. "He would not give up anything, even though he was quite shy. If he put his mind to something, he would achieve it. That's what has made him such an extraordinary player – such a winner."

One story stands out. Criticised by a local journalist for an early Hogaborg display, Larsson logged the less-than-effusive appraisal and stored it. When he joined local professional side Helsingborg in early 1992, the 21-year-old threw the scribe into a swimming pool as a prank.

Overlooked by Sweden's bigger clubs, Larsson had only made it to full-time football after impressing Helsingborg on a trial organised by former Benfica striker Mats Magnusson. On the equivalent of just £75 per week, Larsson showed a determination and love of training – a trait he kept throughout his career – which resulted in an immediate explosion of talent. He scored 51 goals in 61 games, 34 of them coming in a debut season that sealed Helsingborg's return to the Allsvenskan after 24 years away.

"Those were two sensational years at Helsingborg: I was able to score a lot of goals and we were promoted to the Swedish top flight," Larsson says proudly today. "That was the point I knew I would make it; when I realised that I was going to be able to make a living from my great hobby. It was the best showcase for me to go to Feyenoord."

Larsson – wisely, some Tottenham fans would say – picked the Netherlands over Christian Gross' Grasshopper Zurich in November 1993. "It was a good place to learn, mature and grow," he tells *FFT*. "It was another culture, another way of doing things, and I enjoyed it. At the same time, I also didn't play as much as I would have liked, but I understood that it was part of the process. It was difficult to arrive so young, alone, with a different language, but those three and a half years laid the foundations of what I later became as a footballer."

Six months after his transfer, a 22-year-old Larsson helped Sweden to reach the semi-finals of the World Cup, and scored in



a 4-0 thrashing of Bulgaria in the third-place play-off. "Not many people expected Sweden to get that far," he admits. "It was historic for our country, and back home it was crazy. On the plane back to Stockholm, we were escorted by military aircraft. When we arrived, the prime minister was waiting to congratulate us, and thousands and thousands came out on to the streets to cheer us. It was unforgettable."

Back at Feyenoord, Larsson's inconsistency in the Eredivisie hadn't been helped by manager Wim Jansen being moved upstairs within two months of signing him. Only in the last of his four seasons in Rotterdam did the Swede play up front, and even then he suffered from manager Arie Haan's rotation policy. Larsson and Feyenoord fans grew frustrated at an average barely better than a goal every four games at De Kuip, and he resolved to leave in 1997 for the sake of his marriage to Magdalena and new-born son Jordan, later admitting that he had become "moody and difficult to live with".

A clause in Larsson's contract said that he could move for just £650,000, but Feyenoord dug in their heels and took the case to court. Larsson won. He was off to Celtic.

Reunited with Jansen in Glasgow, Larsson made his debut on opening day. It didn't go to plan. Having come on as a substitute away at Hibernian with the score 1-1, the



new signing inadvertently played in opposition midfielder Chic Charnley to lash home a 25-yard winner for the Hibees – not the best start for Celtic, with Walter Smith's Rangers looking to become the first team to win 10 Scottish titles in a row.

Yet in Larsson the Hoops had the perfect combination of inspiration and perspiration. Larsson had the grit to help them to turn the club around. Years later, he revealed the message that he recited to himself before every game: "I know I am bloody strong; that I am stronger than them. Even if it hurts, it is going to hurt them even more."

HAIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

The goals soon flowed. By November, Larsson's 13th goal of the season delivered his first trophy, with a 3-0 defeat of Dundee United in the Scottish League Cup final.

The 19th – a lustrous 25-yard curler to open the scoring against St Johnstone on the final day – was not only arguably the best, but it was definitely the most memorable. The 2-0 win secured the league title for the Bhoys, at Rangers' 10-in-a-row expense.

"We didn't understand all of that, which was why we managed to keep our heads," Larsson told *FFT*, citing the 1997-98 triumph as one of his favourite Celtic moments. "If we'd been there longer and known we had to stop Rangers from winning 10 in a row, it would have been much more difficult."



"THE ATMOSPHERE... I HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED THAT ANYWHERE ELSE"



Top left Frustration in Rotterdam **Left** A Rangers 10-in-a-row safely averted **Top right** An iconic look, until suddenly he just shaved it all off

Despite Jansen's surprise exit two days after winning the title, to be replaced by Jozef Venglos, Larsson was even more prolific the following season. Firing 38 goals in 48 games earned him a hat-trick of individual awards – Players' Player of the Year, the Scottish Writers' Player of the Year and Sweden's Player of the Year – even as the Gers swept to a domestic treble under newly-appointed manager Dick Advocaat.

When John Barnes replaced Venglos for the 1999-2000 campaign, the early signs were good. Celtic had won seven of their first eight league games, Larsson already scoring 12 goals in all competitions, when they visited Lyon in the UEFA Cup second round. Nine minutes into the contest, the Hoops' totem collapsed in agony following a tangle of legs with defender Serge Blanc.

"I think I've broken my leg," Larsson said in Dutch to referee Rene Temmink, whose face he recalled from his time in the Eredivisie. He looked down and saw his lower appendage hanging in the wrong direction, held together by little more than his sock. With his leg fractured in two places and a titanium rod inserted, Larsson never quite recovered the acceleration that made him unstoppable; soon, however, he realised that even walking again would be an achievement.

"I struggled with the simple things you take for granted, like going to the loo," he told *FFT*. "I don't think anyone who hasn't been in that situation understands what it's like. It made me want to fight even harder to come back."

By the time Larsson returned to make a 25-minute cameo on the final day of the season, Barnes was long gone, following a catastrophic run of results culminating in an infamous Scottish Cup defeat to part-timers Inverness Caledonian Thistle. You may remember the newspaper headline.

Martin O'Neill took his place in the Parkhead dugout that summer. Manager and star striker got along famously. "Henrik could be aloof at times, but there's nothing wrong with that – I invented the word," O'Neill once laughed. "You could always rely on him. You need people who can turn the game for you."

By the end of August, Larsson had scored the goal that every Celtic fan remembers best, in a 6-2 demolition of Rangers. First the Swede nutmegged Bert Konterman, then he bisected the defence to dink the ball over Stefan Klos from just outside the area.

"I scored a lot of goals, but that lob is one people remember," he tells *FFT*, a glimmer to his eye. The Old Firm derby still resonates, and not just for the 15 goals he scored in them. "There's not a lot of love between the fans, but it's the best derby in the world. In the same city, between two great clubs, all eyes are on when they will meet again in the calendar. The atmosphere, the noise in the stadium... I haven't experienced that anywhere else. It really is indescribable."

The following month, Larsson did the unthinkable. He walked into Ellen Conlin's Hyndland hair salon and said, "I'm bored with these – give me a new image." Larsson's trademark dreadlocks were no more.

Unbeknown to him, sat to his left was a local journalist who, sensing the scoop of the decade, called the news desk. By the time Larsson had left the salon – having scooped up all bar one of the shorn locks, later auctioned off for charity by the salon – a paparazzi swarm had gathered outside.

"There's no secret," he recalls with a shrug. "One day I let it grow out and I didn't cut it for 15 years. Those dreadlocks were iconic, but everything has its moment in life."

If the rest of Scotland had hoped for some kind of Samson-esque loss of goalscoring might, they were out of luck. In March 2001, hungrier than ever after nearly losing his leg 15 months previously, Larsson hit a sublime hat-trick against Kilmarnock in the Scottish League Cup final. The third goal involved him running half the length of the pitch, sitting ▶







the goalkeeper down and rolling the ball into an empty net. "He just keeps getting better," said O'Neill. "I've always said that Larsson would score goals in any league. That goal would grace any cup final, in any century."

This was Larsson's annus mirabilis. His record 35 league goals delivered the title by 15 points and the European Golden Shoe as the continent's top league goalscorer, ahead of Hernan Crespo and Andriy Shevchenko. A brace in the Scottish Cup final took his final tally to 53 in all competitions from 50 appearances. It was Celtic's first treble since 1969, during the Jock Stein era.

"Larsson is one of the best strikers in Europe, maybe the world," said Rangers boss Advocaat. "If you watch Gabriel Batistuta, he is sometimes not seen for 90 minutes but he scores two goals. Larsson has even more because, besides being a good player and goalscorer, he has a tremendous work rate."

The Hoops retained their title in 2001-02 with 103 points – 29 goals in 33 games for Larsson, thanks for asking – but also began to make inroads in Europe, beating Ajax in Champions League qualifying, then Juventus in the group stage: 4-3 at a febrile Parkhead.

The 2002-03 season commenced with Champions League qualifying defeat to Basel but ended with a run to the UEFA Cup final that no Celtic supporter will ever forget. Desperate to prove himself on the European stage, Larsson scored against every team he faced, including Battle of Britain epics against Blackburn and Liverpool. Agonisingly, despite his two deadly headers, the Bhoys of Seville fell just short in the final, losing 3-2 in extra time to Jose Mourinho's Porto.

The worst night of his career?

"No doubt about it," he admits. "It still hurts that we couldn't take that UEFA Cup back to Glasgow. We played a great game that night, but the circumstances didn't work out. The little details weren't on our side.

"That Porto team went on to win the Champions League [the following year]. That is testament to how good a team we had."

The fondness with which Larsson recalls that period shines through. "At Celtic I made a name for myself in this industry, and the player I was," he explains. "Everything I did in Glasgow was fantastic. The club and the fans always treated me with great affection, and I had sensational team-mates."

WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

That summer, Larsson announced that the upcoming 2003-04 season would be his last in Scotland. Turning 32 a few weeks into the start of it, part of him bristled when the public suggested he "wasn't the old Larsson any more" after any game in which he didn't score. He wanted a new challenge. A week after firing a brace in his final home game, rounding off a fourth title-winning campaign in seven seasons, his 313th Celtic appearance yielded goals No.241 and No.242 in a 3-1 win against Dunfermline in the Scottish Cup final.

Larsson had the pick of more than 30 clubs for his next move, but from the moment he spoke to Barcelona manager Frank Rijkaard, his mind was made up.

"He was honest: he told me that maybe I wouldn't be an undisputed starter, but he wanted a player to complement the team," Larsson recalls to *FFT* now. "I'm not going to lie: I would have liked to play more. You have







to be mentally strong to accept that role – in fact, I didn't accept it, because I always tried to be a starter. But I always prepared as if I would be in the line-up. It wasn't easy."

Larsson shone in his new role as on-call difference-maker. He had scored four goals in 17 appearances – including an inevitable goal against Celtic when the teams drew each other in the Champions League – and started November's Clasico against Real Madrid ahead of Ludovic Giuly, Andres Iniesta and a teenage Lionel Messi. After 72 minutes against Real Madrid, he tore his ACL and meniscus in his left knee.

"I wasn't sure I could do the rehabilitation," he says, his tone recalling that broken leg at

Clockwise from far left This cup final hat-trick against Killie wasn't bad; the Golden boy of Europe; "Pick me from the start next time, eh?"; his team-mates could recognise greatness; ditto Fergie; "Scoring on debut helps"

"AFTER BARCELONA AND UNITED, IT WAS HARD FOR PEOPLE TO DOUBT ME. IT SHUT A FEW PEOPLE UP"

Celtic. "That night, my brother was waiting for me at my house in [Barcelona suburb] Gava. We opened a good bottle of wine, we enjoyed it, and I decided that I was going to make the effort to go through all of that and come back strong."

Did he ever. In isolation, Larsson's 2005-06 numbers – 15 goals in 42 appearances – are among the worst of his career, yet his experience and game-changing ability from the bench earned plaudits across Catalonia.

Barça won La Liga by 12 points, before facing Arsenal in the 2006 Champions League Final. With his side 1-0 down in Paris and half an hour remaining, Rijkaard sent on his clutch 34-year-old. Larsson duly set up Samuel Eto'o, then Juliano Belletti, for two goals in five minutes. The Blaugrana were European champions for the second time.

"He changed the game," said Arsenal forward Thierry Henry. "Sometimes you talk about Ronaldinho and Eto'o; you need to talk about the proper footballer who made the difference, and that was Henrik Larsson."

The best night of his career?

"Of course," Larsson says. "That night, many of us touched the sky. I'm proud to be part of that history. When it's the anniversary of that date, people tag me on Instagram, but I don't need to see it to remember it. It's in my mind forever."

It proved to be his final act in a Barcelona shirt. Though he was offered a new contract, he wanted to return home to Helsingborg and give his son, Jordan (now a footballer at FC Copenhagen) and daughter, Janelle (now a national-standard showjumper) a more stable upbringing.

"Jordan was born in Rotterdam, lived for seven years in Glasgow and another two in Barcelona," says Larsson of his son, who was nine by then, five years older than Janelle. "We wanted him to make friends, so it was time for him to return to Helsingborg."

Left behind in Catalonia, a certain buck-toothed Brazilian was devastated.

"I would have loved to play with him for longer," said Ronaldinho, then at the peak of his Ballon d'Or-winning powers. "By the time he left, he was my idol. In fact, he was my idol even before that. I remember him playing for Sweden in the 1994 World Cup. Henrik taught me a lot about football."

"I DON'T WANT TO BE A COACH"

Yet Larsson was still not done at the top level. Midway through the 2006-07 season, Alex Ferguson decided he needed to refresh his forward line if Manchester United were to end a three-season wait for a Premier League title. Wayne Rooney wasn't clinical enough, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer lacked all-round finesse, Louis Saha was raw and Cristiano Ronaldo was only just starting to deliver a deluge of goals.

"When the call came, I didn't hesitate – I had finished the league season in Sweden and it was perfect to go on loan for a few months," recalls Larsson. Was it love at first sight? "It always helps when you score on your debut," laughs the forward, whose 55th-minute volley opened the scoring in a 2-1 FA Cup defeat of Aston Villa. "Going to an iconic club like United when I was older, but still ready to compete at the highest level, was great. I only played 13 games but because I always gave 100 per cent of myself, the supporters appreciated my commitment, my tireless effort and my passion for playing.

"After two years at Barcelona and scoring goals at 35 for United, it was hard for people to doubt me any more. Those things shut a few people up."

United's record with Larsson in the team reflected his exertions – won 10, drew two, lost one – and they eventually won the title by six points. Ferguson even said, "I would have done anything to keep him."

Larsson's word to return to Helsingborg was his bond, but surely he thought about staying beyond March? "That's probably the only regret I have in my career," Larsson wistfully explains. "I should have stayed and enjoyed the Premier League. Manchester United were happy with my work, I was a respected person in the dressing room, and they would probably have offered me a season's renewal."

In October 2009, Larsson eventually retired aged 38 at hometown club Helsingborg, his family close by. "In the end, it wasn't hard to say goodbye to football, because my body was exhausted and getting up after every game was complicated," the contented 52-year-old says now.

Larsson did, however, have a couple of disappointing spells as Helsingborg head coach in which the supporters turned on their playing hero, then he was assistant to Ronald Koeman at Barcelona for 14 months, ending in the Dutchman's sacking in 2021.

"I don't want to be a coach at the minute – I don't feel like it," confides the Swede. "It wasn't a good time at Barcelona. It was complicated by the pandemic and the circumstances around it. I think people should respect Ronald more than they did: he's a Barcelona legend, he left the national team to coach the club, and he deserves much more recognition than he had. But this profession has given me a lot, and I'm very grateful for everything I have experienced."

With that last line, the warmth returns to Larsson's countenance. He considers again the 450-plus goals for club and country, the relentless determination to overcome serious injury, and those magificent seven years with Celtic.

What's it like to have been a Ghod? "Let me be modest," he begins, with that dry sense of humour imbuing his every word, "and say that I feel I am appreciated."

CALM DOWN! CALM DOWN! CALM DOWN!

There's been plenty of noise around Trent Alexander-Arnold's performances for club and country over the past 12 months, but the man himself has maintained a cool head. Donning a retro shellsuit for *FFT*, the Merseyside maestro insists he's still got lofty ambitions – none more so than becoming the best footballer on the planet...

Words Matthew Ketchell **Portraits** Nick Eagle



Sitting across the table from *FourFourTwo*, Trent Alexander-Arnold is silently, agonisingly looking for perfection. It's six years since our last proper sit-down with him, and plenty has happened.

Back in early 2018, a teenage Trent was yet to collect his first England cap, but had officially installed himself into Liverpool's first-team picture. It was a new status – one he was relishing, one he was desperate to hold on to and develop. Boy, has he.

During that chat in the Alexander-Arnold family home, *FFT* asked the young right-back where he saw himself in a few years' time. His prediction was as accurate as one of his famous dead-ball deliveries: "Still at Liverpool – an important figure in a team that's won a lot of silverware."

If the first phase of his career as a Liverpool regular has been important, the second is crucial. You get the feeling he knows it. Now 25 and the Reds' vice-captain, repeating the question 'Where do you see yourself in a few years' time?' has sent Alexander-Arnold into deep, silent thought. He wants his reply to be as measured as one of his signature passes. He won't be rushed. He's stewing, searching for a big answer to a big question.

"Wow. Where will I be? Where will I be?" he quietly repeats to himself, before exhaling through pursed lips. *FFT* waits, as eager to hear his answer as we are to watch the next chapter of what has been a wondrous career.

SHANKLY, THEN TRENT

Stepping outside Liverpool Lime Street station into a blindingly bright but freezing morning, a 30ft tall image of Alexander-Arnold beams back at *FFT* from a giant advertising screen in crystal clear high definition.

As the poster boy of Adidas' new marketing campaign, various shots of Trent posing and pinging footballs around in his new boots are being beamed around Liverpool and various other cities worldwide. In November, he inked one of the most lucrative contracts in Europe with the sportswear giant – everyone wants a piece of Alexander-Arnold.

Illustrating just how box office he's become is a scene we pass on the way to the secret location where we've arranged to meet and snap the Reds' star. The Bill Shankly Playing Fields were named after Liverpool's revered title-winning boss of the 1960s and '70s, and are a stone's throw from the semi-detached house where he once resided in West Derby.

It's the area where Alexander-Arnold grew up as well. Today, the council-run playing fields' car park has been transformed into the compound for an Adidas photo and video shoot, taking place nearby, with Trent as the leading man. Winnebagos, trucks, cars, even a double-decker bus serving as a canteen for dozens of crew members, are tightly parked for an event that dominates the first part of the England international's day. The rest of his afternoon is dedicated to *FFT*.

Our secret location, it turns out, isn't very secret after all. As we arrive, a smattering of Liverpool fans, young and old, are already milling around the car park and reception area of the venue. It's hours before their hero is scheduled to show up, but his supporters are happy to wait, just for a glimpse of him.

Later, with the room finally ready and the sun beginning to set, two large vehicles with blacked-out windows crawl into the car park. Alexander-Arnold emerges from one and calmly strolls inside to our allocated space, flanked by an entourage of two.

In 2018, the 19-year-old we interviewed had big potential and big dreams. In 2024, he has both Premier League and Champions League winner's medals to his name, plus a ticket on England's plane to Euro 2024 in Germany all but booked.

"Everything's just kind of evolved," he tells *FFT*, reflecting on the passage of time since his breakthrough campaign, cogitating on whether or not there was a specific moment where he felt like he officially belonged in the Liverpool first team.

"There have been significant moments that changed my mentality. After Kyiv [where the Reds lost the 2018 Champions League Final to Real Madrid], I went from being a young player who'd played in a Champions League final at 19, to needing to experience it again and wanting to be back there. Simply feeling, 'This is where I belong'.





Above Everyone wants a piece of Trent right now **Below** *"FFT, who are they? Exactly"*

"I DON'T FEAR MISTAKES. IF THERE'S A CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING AND HELP US WIN, I DON'T SECOND GUESS MY JUDGEMENT"

"It was always a dream to reach that level, and to do it so young, it wasn't like, 'OK, I've achieved that now'. It was more like, 'I need to play in as many finals as possible' because those were the feelings I chased so much. That really motivated me, so I think Kyiv was a big moment."

That late May night in Ukraine's national stadium, Alexander-Arnold experienced the thrill of playing on the biggest stage in club football but also the devastation of having his teenage dreams crushed by the holders, featuring some robust defending from Sergio Ramos and acrobatic Gareth Bale brilliance.

Twelve months on, he helped to right that wrong in an extraordinary semi-final second leg at Anfield, as Liverpool overcame a 3-0 first-leg deficit to beat a Lionel Messi-inspired Barcelona 4-3 on aggregate.

It was a script that even the scattiest of screenwriters would be nervous submitting. The key scene saw Alexander-Arnold take possibly one of the most famous corner-kicks of all time – rather than wait for Virgil van Dijk to march up from defence, the rookie right-back instead caught the entire Barça team napping with a swiftly-taken set piece that allowed Divock Origi to bag the winning goal.

"It was just natural," he says, shrugging off the significance of his quickly-whipped corner. "I felt like the big occasions might alter the way I thought, or affect me in a different way. Whereas when I got to those big occasions, I felt like that's where I belonged.

"That's what brought the best out of me – rather than downing tools a little bit and not being able to perform to the level, it was more I had to elevate myself to a high level. Those sorts of games naturally demand you to play the best that you can and think on the spot, and have those moments of brilliance – I was able to come up with one."

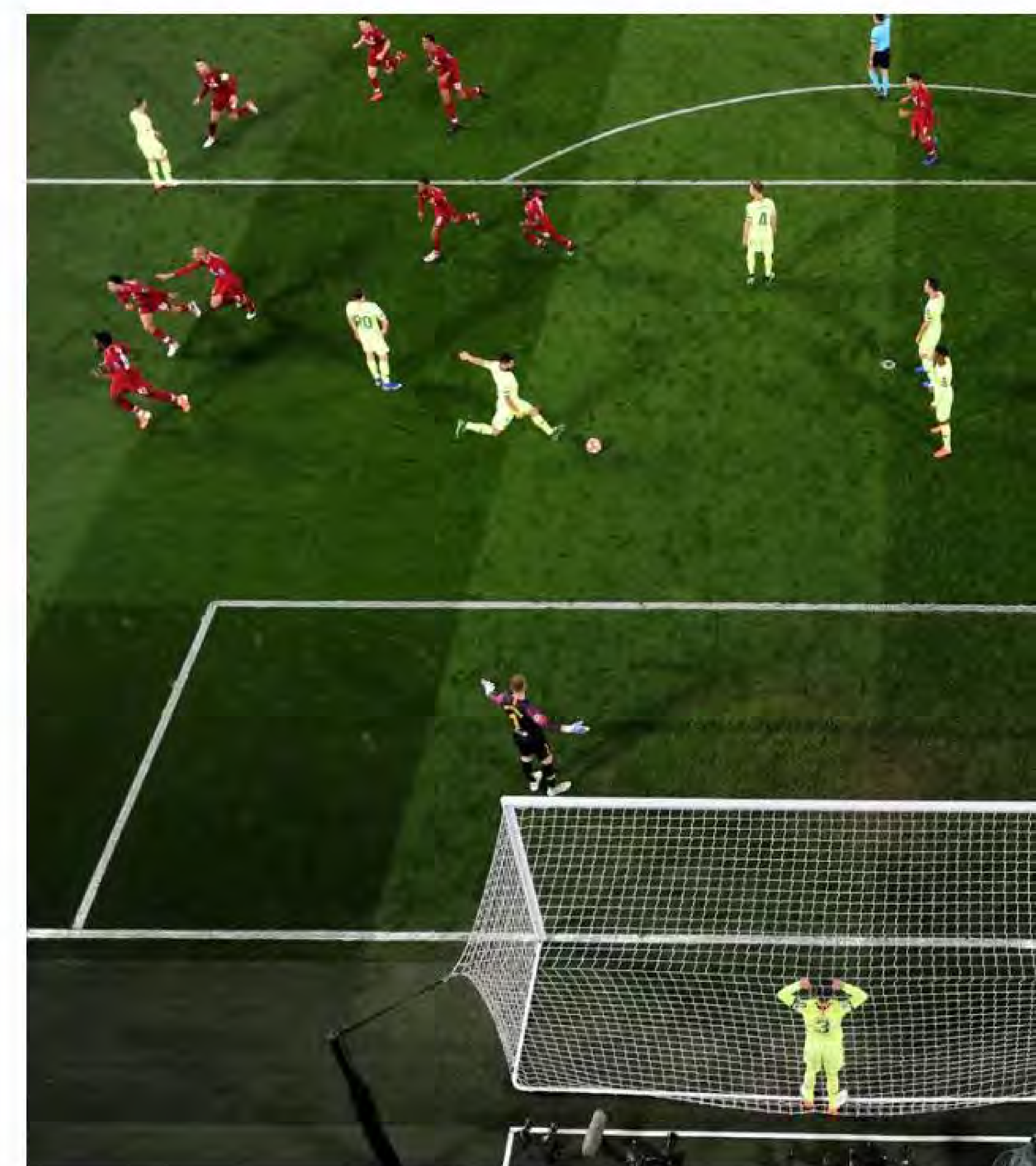
The context of the moment – 11 minutes of normal time remaining, 3-3 on aggregate, all-star opponents – made the audacity of what the 20-year-old did in front of the Kop almost laughable. Even goalscorer Origi had his back to play as Alexander-Arnold pulled the trigger on his cross. What prompted the tyro to even attempt such a high-risk move?

"I just thought, 'It's there'," he reflects. "I'm someone who doesn't fear mistakes. It's not something that will change the way I play the game. If I believe there's a chance to create an opportunity or do something to help the team win a game, then I don't second guess my judgement on it.

"In that split second, you weigh up all of the options. Do you wait for your centre-backs to come up, whip the ball into the penalty area and hopefully put it on Virg's head? Or do you trust your gut and not think, 'If I cross it now and Divock doesn't turn, Barça will clear it, or it might go straight through the box and I'll get shouted at'. Those sorts of things never really change the way I make my decisions."







Top Righting the wrong of 2018 **Above** Stunning Barcelona with the corner that shook the world

"MORE IMPORTANT THAN SALAH"

Football IQ and bravery combined to create an incredible moment, and a route from 3-0 down in Barcelona – Joe Gomez had started the first-leg loss at the Camp Nou rather than Trent – to Atletico's Madrid's Metropolitano Stadium and a 2-0 Champions League final triumph against Tottenham. It was Liverpool's sixth European Cup success, lifting their tally above Barça's once more.

That night in Spain's capital went some way to healing the domestic pain suffered three weeks earlier, when Jurgen Klopp's men took the Premier League title race to the final day of the season. They won their last nine games to finish on 97 points, then the highest total in their history, only for Manchester City to pip them on 98 after a 14-match winning streak.

A year earlier, Pep Guardiola's team topped the table with a record 100 points. Using the modern day tennis theory of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic driving each other to heights no one thought ever existed, and applying it to the current Premier League era, have Klopp and Guardiola found levels in their sides that they might not have thought possible without each other?

"Oh by far. By far!" Alexander-Arnold tells *FFT*. "It's no coincidence that the best points tallies ever have all come in the last five or six years. Without us, I don't know if Manchester City consistently post those numbers, and I'm sure that without City, we wouldn't have hit those numbers consistently. ▸

"It needs to be demanded to reach those numbers – you can't get to them with luck. It's hard to do it if every other team achieves low-80 points, but when you know one team is capable of reaching 100, you need to get in and around 100 to even stand a chance. It's been about demanding the maximum from each other – us and City have been able to do that consistently."

The momentum generated after defeating Tottenham in Madrid catapulted Liverpool into the 2019-20 campaign, navigating the COVID pandemic to finally secure their first league title in 30 years.

It was clinched in statistical style: earliest title win ever (with seven games remaining, even though it was actually in June), biggest points lead at any stage of the season (25) and most consecutive home victories (24, of which seven were carried over from 2018-19). Their record points haul of 97 had lasted just one season – they topped the table with 99.

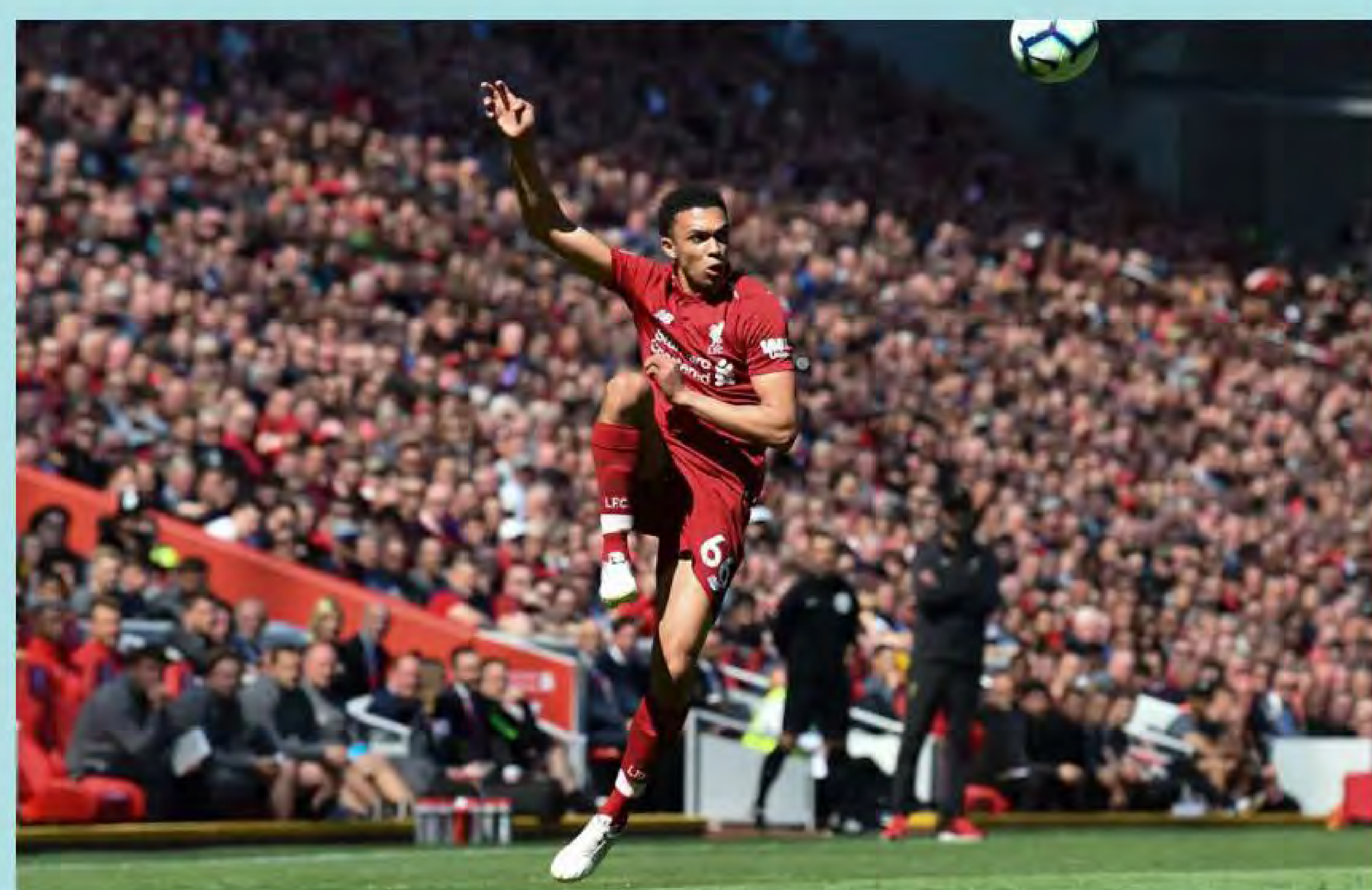
"If it wasn't for COVID, we'd have broken every record out there, in terms of number of points won and goals scored, but it wasn't meant to be," reflects Alexander-Arnold, still pondering ways they could have improved on their best ever league campaign. Having won a ludicrous 27 of 29 games before football was halted, they drew twice and lost twice in their final nine matches.

"But the way we played, and how incredible we were that season was... I don't think we'll ever see anything like it again," adds Trent. "How far we got without really dropping any points is something I'm sure not many teams will ever go on to achieve."

The title was confirmed in slightly strange circumstances, with the Reds' squad and staff gathered at Formby Hall, socially distanced from fans, watching Manchester City lose to Chelsea behind closed doors. The pandemic denied the team the celebrations they had shed blood, sweat and tears for.

"It was unfortunate," recalls the right-back now. "But we made the best out of a different situation to what it could have been, and we did celebrate – that night was unbelievable."

Alexander-Arnold picked up the PFA Young Player of the Year prize that term. Four years on, his displays have put him in contention to receive the senior award at some stage and join an elite group of men to gobble up both honours: Andy Gray, Ian Rush, Mark Hughes, Steven Gerrard, Cristiano Ronaldo, Ryan Giggs, Wayne Rooney, Gareth Bale and Eden Hazard.





> "IF IT WASN'T FOR COVID, LIVERPOOL WOULD HAVE BROKEN THE POINTS AND GOALS RECORDS IN 2020"

"I think he's stepped up," said Reds legend Jamie Carragher, praising Alexander-Arnold on the *Stick to Football* podcast. The former defender was pointing to the fact that Virgil van Dijk, Mohamed Salah and Trent all have deals due to expire in the summer of 2025.

"Maybe with Jordan Henderson and James Milner not being there, you feel there's a bit more of a presence about him now. Trent is the one you've got to build this team around for a new manager coming in – he's the most important one.

"Salah and Van Dijk? In 12 months, the club will look at that and go, 'You have six months left, how are you feeling?' They're both on big wages and rightly so, but 18 months is a long time in football. In 18 months, Salah and Van Dijk will be 33 and 34, so while there's all of this panic about losing them, it might be the right decision in 18 months."

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

The three giant elephants in the room can't be ignored, even if the more pressing priorities have been challenging for a second Premier League title and preparing to say goodbye to their beloved boss after almost a decade at the helm. But while there's been a lot of noise about Liverpool's star trio, Alexander-Arnold has remained focused on the task at hand.



Clockwise from top Van Dijk and Trent have been key for Klopp; the Premier League's top youngster of 2019-20; devilish deliveries galore; kings of England again at long last

That means not worrying about individual accolades, too. Deep down he would love to bag the PFA Players' Player of the Year prize in the near future – on the surface, though, he's relaxed about the fact his name was mentioned among the potential contenders earlier this campaign.

"You hear things, but no, it's not something I actively think about," he says. "If your team does very well and you perform, then you'll be honoured at the end of the season. You need to be able to help the team get wins, because it would be quite rare that you find someone whose team finishes sixth or seventh winning a big individual award. It's always from the teams that come first or second. I want to be the best player I can be, and I've always been a firm believer that individual awards follow team awards."



Liverpool are certainly on course to contend this term; they were sitting top of the table after 25 matches, but still being there after 38 games is what matters most – something the Reds are all too aware of after suffering more final-day despair in 2021-22, finishing one point behind City once again. Last season was frustrating for different reasons, floundering to fifth and failing to qualify for the Champions League, so with the surprise news that Klopp will be leaving at the end of the campaign, this particular title race has suddenly taken on added significance.

One defeat in their first 22 fixtures means there's every chance of a fairytale finish for the German boss, so what's been the secret? "Our consistency has been back this time," Alexander-Arnold explains to *FFT*, describing the renewed vigour with which the side have attacked this season, after a disappointing 2022-23. "Barring maybe one or two seasons where consistency hasn't been there, I think ▸

AFTER ACADEMY

Last year, the Reds' ace launched The After Academy, helping those who didn't make it professionally to secure work outside the game.

According to PFA statistics, 99 per cent of kids signed to an academy aged nine don't reach the pro ranks – of starlets who sign a scholarship at 16, just 17 per cent are pros at 21.

The After Academy now has a jobs board on the PFA website, listing roles open to ex-academy players. The hiring process doesn't focus on traditional qualifications, instead prioritising those who can display transferable skills picked up while at academies, from leadership and teamwork to resilience.

On top of assistance from the PFA, Trent has enlisted help from his club and commercial partners, as well as injecting some personal cash into the project – he tells *FFT* why...

When did you come up with the idea for The After Academy?
At the back end of 2020. I saw a lot of people in unfortunate situations due to COVID, including pals I grew up with. Helping them is something I've been passionate about for ages.

How will it help people?
By giving chances to young people who drop out of academy systems. The most important word is opportunity – that's all you can ask for between 16 and 21. You need to be ready to take it, whether that's football or not. So, we provide opportunities through work experience and internships at brands.

Is there a player you saw at academy level who you're shocked never made it as a pro?
More than I can name, to be honest. You wouldn't believe the amount of talent in the academies. There were many players I came up against and played with who I always thought were better than me – technically better and physically better – but key decisions didn't go their way, injuries kicked in or they just never kicked on, then found themselves out of football. The endless amount of players that happens to yearly is extraordinary, and that's why creating something like The After Academy is incredibly important to me.

THE SCOUSER IN OUR TEAM

Matt Ladson from fan site *This Is Anfield* is relishing Alexander-Arnold's chase for the numbers set by Liverpool's iconic players

Jurgen Klopp once (half joking, half serious) said he dreamed of a "team full of Scousers" – while that won't come to fruition, he's provided Reds' supporters with a truly world-class local talent.

Alexander-Arnold's "the Scouser in our team" chant needs pluralising, now that Curtis Jones has evolved into an important player as well, but the sentiment shows how vital the right-back is to Liverpool supporters.

Having a local lad in the line-up is always something the fans crave, and after the golden era of Robbie Fowler, Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, Trent's development under Klopp has provided fans with another of their own – a player who grew up within walking distance of the Reds' training ground, and was one of those children who stood on wheelie bins and peered over the wall for a glimpse of their heroes.

Alexander-Arnold is now a hero to supporters himself, and his No.66 has become iconic – immortalised in paint on one of numerous murals around the roads of Anfield. On that artwork is a quote which sums him up perfectly: "I'm just a normal lad from Liverpool whose dream has just come true." His story, fans may think, could be their story – if only they were as exceptionally talented at football as Trent.

The 25-year-old represents more than just a footballer. He's a lad who inspires local kids and understands the values of the club, the city, the community and its fans. He isn't merely a representative of Liverpool Football Club, but Liverpool as a city.

Now Liverpool's vice-captain and destined to become skipper himself one day, his 300-plus outings mean he could become the first Liverpool player since Gerrard and Carragher to rack up 700 appearances for the Reds. Could Trent even surpass the revered Phil Neal as the club's most decorated player of all time? Neal held 23 trophies aloft – Alexander-Arnold is on his coattails after lifting a magnificent seven.

over the course of the last five years it's been incredibly consistent from me and the team.

"We showed last season that we could beat any team on our day, but we just lacked that consistency. We were never able to back up the performances – our great performances last season were often followed by a more disappointing one. I think that's been the big difference this year: being able to continue game after game, going and winning games, and getting the results we need. We know that from now to the end of the season it's going to be extremely difficult, but we back ourselves – we know what it takes, and what we need to do."

Beat Guardiola and Manchester City, that's the first thing they need to do. A 'do-it-for-Jurgen' mantra for the mentality monsters might be what it takes to dethrone the sky blue juggernaut's bid to clinch four top-flight championships on the bounce, a feat that's never been achieved in the history of English football, dating back to 1888.

"It's difficult," admits Alexander-Arnold. "You're up against a machine that's built to win – that's the simplest way to describe City and their organisation. Looking back on this era, although they've won more titles than us and have probably been more successful, our trophies will mean more to us and our fanbase because of the situations at both clubs, financially. How both clubs have built their teams and the manner in which we've done it probably means more to our fans.

"From the turn of the year, City switch it on and it's a difficult machine to stop. But we've shown in the past that we've been able to do it and there's no reason why we can't go and match them this season. We're excited to be involved with City and know we're in a good position. I'm sure they'll be motivated, as are we. It's going to be an exciting end."

ICE MAN TO VICE MAN

Alexander-Arnold in 2024 still looks exactly like the teenager that *FFT* encountered six years ago: fresh-faced, trim, his eyes scanning as intently for the correct answers to our questions as they would for a killer through-ball to Salah. If the pressures of playing at the highest level weigh mentally, they don't show physically.

Once *FFT* had arrived in Liverpool and got set up ahead of our afternoon with the star, we had some time to spare so snuck on to the outdoor film set where he was spending the first half of his day, on a closed residential road. A gaggle of crew members huddled in a black gazebo, while most of the action took place 50 yards into the distance.

Unexpectedly, a boy appeared wandering down the street as he returned home from school – noticing something odd was going on, he politely requested permission to cross the road and enter his house. "Of course!" said a friendly film crew member, producing a packet of sweets by way of apology for the intrusion into his commute. Moments later, the lad was stood in his doorway eating the sweets and wearing a cheeky smile, having changed into full Everton kit.





Above Silencing the Etihad after scoring to earn the Reds a draw

Alexander-Arnold could still be seen up the road, identifiable by a three-quarter-length all-white puffer jacket he reluctantly removed when the cameras started rolling. It was 2C and pretty repetitive work, so *FFT* was starting to worry that our interview subject might be a tad chilly and moody by the time we finally sat down to natter.

Thankfully that didn't prove to be the case, but there's a marked change in demeanour between the teenage Trent we met in 2018 and the 25-year-old Trent of 2024. There's a calmness and seriousness. The boy is now a man, equipped with the quiet confidence that persuaded Klopp to award the lifelong Red the vice-captaincy following the exits of Henderson and Milner.

With Van Dijk acquiring the armband from Henderson, the moment Alexander-Arnold discovered that he was to become second in command was touchingly captured by the Reds' media team, as Klopp pulled him aside in the middle of a pre-season training session while on tour in Singapore.

"I don't know why he chose that moment," reminisces Trent. "I think it was more that he maybe felt like it was going to get out into the press. I think he just wanted to let me and Virgil know, then later on that evening he told the whole leadership team. It was a very, very special moment for me." ▸



"CITY CAN SWITCH IT ON AND IT'S A HARD MACHINE TO STOP, BUT THERE'S NO REASON WHY WE CAN'T MATCH THEM THIS SEASON"



The element of surprise has been a Klopp signature – in February, Alexander-Arnold informed the media that he knew nothing of the manager's decision to leave at the end of the season until the day it was announced. "I was as shocked as anyone else – it was a huge surprise to all of us," he said. "But it's a personal decision that he's taken and you have to respect it. I've loved absolutely every minute of working with him."

The vice-captaincy is a wonderful leaving gift, from the only club boss that Trent has ever played under. "It's something I worked incredibly hard for," he tells *FFT*. "Something I set my sights on for a while, and something I've not been shy in speaking about: being a leader and being a captain; leading in my way, which is being fearless, always getting on the ball and always trying to make things happen. The competitiveness that I bring to the team, a will to win in training and games, hopefully drags other guys through with me."

Given Van Dijk's age, Alexander-Arnold appears likely to succeed him as skipper in the not-too-distant future. He smiles when *FFT* asks if he's already begun rehearsing his version of the 'Hendo shuffle', the former captain's distinctive trophy-lifting technique, when it's his own turn to raise aloft a trinket.

"No, I haven't thought about it," he insists. "But I'm sure if that day does come, I'll need to think of something creative that fits right with me! That's something I dreamed of as a kid – lifting trophies, being the leader.

"But it's much more than just being able to lift a trophy at the end of a season. It's about helping the team get there and things behind the scenes that you have to do as a leader, helping the team to bond and really sacrifice for each other. There's a lot that goes into it. The icing on the cake is lifting trophies at the end. Potentially one day that'll be something that is a reality for me."

"IT'S LOSE-LOSE FOR GARETH"

Lifting more trophies, and the prospect of doing it as Liverpool's homegrown captain,

Below A midfield role might get the best out of him in an England shirt

PUBLICITY GOALS

Adidas' unveiling of their latest Predator boots had been planned for December 1 – but Alexander-Arnold may have accidentally-on-purpose let the cat out of the bag.

It's 30 years since the sportswear giant released the first Predators in 1994 – three decades on, they're still worn by countless European superstars, with Liverpool's No.66 among those to don them in this campaign. That included during a vital Premier League showdown at Manchester City on November 25, six days before the official roll-out of the Predator 24s, when Trent not only wore a custom pair of the cleats, but crashed in a late leveller in them. Subtle.

The 25-year-old had been given 'familiarisation boots' – unbranded, sample pairs, typically in all-black or all-white – which players wear in training sessions to test and get used to before the real McCoy is unleashed. Adidas Football's VP of Design, Sam Handy, smiles when he explains that Trent's 'unveiling' at the Etihad Stadium wasn't quite in the initial proposal.

"Normally people have to wait until we launch the product and just wear them in training," Handy tells *FFT*. "But we had a fair few players... begging is not the right word, but, you know, asking really nicely, 'Can I wear these now?'. As far as I can remember, it's the first time we've had players immediately taking them from familiarisation directly into matches."

All publicity's good publicity, right? And it doesn't get much better than bagging a belting goal at the home of the champions.

"I STILL BELIEVE I HAVE A BIG ROLE TO PLAY WITH ENGLAND, TO HELP THE TEAM WIN SILVERWARE"

is fairytale stuff. On the international stage, the fable hasn't been so utopian. For a player as talented as Alexander-Arnold, his current tally of 23 caps feels on the lean side. Fellow 25-year-olds Declan Rice and Mason Mount have 48 and 36 respectively, even if the latter has been going through a difficult period at club level in recent times.

Alexander-Arnold is philosophical about his own situation – there have been extenuating circumstances to factor in such as injury, club versus country tactical differences and the avalanche of talent that England have at right-back, where he's been competing with Kyle Walker, Kieran Trippier and Reece James.

"I think a lot of it comes down to timing," says Alexander-Arnold after a lengthy pause. "In a different era and different generation, I'd have played much more for my country. However, I'm a firm believer in my own ability, what I bring to a team and what I can do on a football pitch. I still believe I've got a big role to play with England, to go and help the team win silverware – whether I play every minute of a tournament or I play no minutes at all in a tournament.



Right Trent is obvious captain material once Van Dijk departs

"I fully understand that decisions have to be made and I'll never throw my toys out the pram. I feel like I've enjoyed the good side of it at club level, as someone who knows he's going to play most games, and I've got that trust in the manager. I'm fortunate enough to not have to think about that too much at Liverpool, and just go and perform."

Alexander-Arnold has travelled to a couple of major tournaments with the Three Lions: the World Cups of both 2018 and 2022 – he was named in the squad for Euro 2020, but pulled out after injuring a thigh in a warm-up game against Austria.

Even at the two World Cups, he only played a total of 112 minutes, appearing in the third and final group match of both competitions. Against Belgium in 2018, he started when the Three Lions had already qualified for the next round; against Wales in Qatar, he jogged on when England were 2-0 in front. On a handful of occasions, he's found himself omitted from the squad entirely, most recently last March.

Gaffer Gareth Southgate has always been regarded as someone who treats players with care and respect, and Alexander-Arnold's experience with him seems to reinforce that.

"No matter what, no matter how the news is presented to you, it's always disappointing when you're told you're not in the squad or you're not in the team," he admits. "But I'm someone who's very rational around those kinds of things.

"I know how difficult it must be. You've got so many options, so many decisions to make, and I'll never hold it against a manager for making that decision. Every player thinks they should start. It's natural. You think, 'I can win games and I can help the team'. You believe you're good enough and you need that belief. So no matter what, no matter who you pick, you're always making the wrong decision – it's a lose-lose situation."

Clearly, playing for his country means an awful lot to Alexander-Arnold. "Oh, so much, so much," he stresses. "When I was younger, I dreamt of being able to play for my country, to win trophies for my country, to be a part of England teams that win titles. I've still got those ambitions, and every time I'm able to wear the shirt, words don't really describe it."

The chance to fulfil those ambitions lies in wait in Germany, with Alexander-Arnold's evolution into a hybrid defender-midfielder adding a tantalising option to the Three Lions' arsenal heading into Euro 2024. Southgate picked him in midfield for England's qualifiers against Malta and North Macedonia in June 2023, then repeated the trick for the reverse fixtures against the same sides in November.

Should everything go to plan, the next four or five months could prove sensational for the 25-year-old – another Premier League crown remains up for grabs, while the Merseysiders also have their eye on a Europa League final in Dublin at the end of May. Force his way into England's starting XI and get his country over the line at the Euros, and that would make for a pretty good 2024.

None of it will be easy, and he hasn't been helped by a knee injury limiting his game time since early January, but as he pointed out at the start of our interview, Trent isn't someone who lets big moments affect his thinking or actions. Just as well, because we've still got the big question to ask before his day is done. Where does he see himself in five years' time?

"Ah, what do I even say?!" he smiles. "I'll be 30 – now that's scary." After a long pause, he has his answer. "Winning big individual honours, being the best player in the world, being a captain, playing my part in winning trophies for England, cementing a legendary status within football."

Bold, ambitious, not illogical. Roll on 2029.

Turn over to read more from Trent on tactics

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT THE SKILL SET I'VE GOT IS BEST SUITED TO THE MIDDLE OF THE PITCH"

Alexander-Arnold tells **Adam Clery** about his hybrid role – and his admiration for Brighton

Your role has changed recently, moving from full-back to central midfield when Liverpool are in possession. When did those conversations start, and what was your reaction?
I was excited. It was a couple of days before the Arsenal home game last April, the 2-2 draw, but we didn't have much time to work on it. I always felt, without putting a label on it, that I've been given freedom – not so much to play as a double six or right in midfield but being able to drop into a back three, or push up high almost like a right-winger, or take possession in the right half-space. I've been able to create for eight years, so we didn't change too much. In my opinion, I've always believed that the ability and skill set I've got is best suited to playing in the middle of the pitch. You get the best out of my specific skill set by playing in the middle, and I saw it as an opportunity to show the world that. That's what excited me.

When you're approaching a game now, do you try to focus on the defensive side of your role, or are you thinking about how you can impact the game from the middle?
Both, to be honest. My main focus always has, and always will be, what I need to do to help the team win the game. Whether that's defensively or offensively, I'm prepared to do that. People will talk about the games where I've been able to dictate the play, but there have been matches where I've had to be more defensively sound and not been able to get on the ball. For me, it doesn't matter. I like to impact the game at both ends of the pitch. If the feeling of the match is that I'm not going to get the ball too much and not be able to dictate things, then you have to find another way. If that means defensively doing your job as well as you can, stopping the attackers and getting a clean sheet, then I've helped the team to win the game.

Does any particular game stand out where you realised that system was a great fit for you, and was going to work long term?
I'd say it was gradual, and already it's evolved and been adapted in many ways. I think the first game that worked amazingly was when we played Leeds away in April, right after we played Arsenal. We won 6-1 and I think I had the most touches and most passes – I'd like to see all of the data. I thought I dictated the game and that's when I said, "Yeah, this will work, it's natural." I was moving, I was on the ball, I was able to do what I needed and so was everybody else. When you win 6-1, that usually means you've done something right. But then there have also been games where I've been man-marked, I can't get on



"THE WAY BRIGHTON BUILD AND PLAY FROM THE BACK IS BRAVE AND EXCEPTIONAL, BUT TRYING TO STOP IT IS AN ABSOLUTE NIGHTMARE!"

the ball, I can't really do anything and I have to think, 'How do I make things happen?'. Looking back to the Aston Villa home game this season, there was a big contrast because we played them at the end of last season and they were so compact, so tight, that I couldn't get on the ball. I felt restricted and couldn't do anything. This season, we changed things and adapted. I was dropping to the backline, and because they were still tight with a high line, I was able to play balls in behind and it worked that way – similar to Arsenal at home this season when I was spraying balls into Mo Salah. So, it's changed and it's adapted. It's not a set mould where it's very restricted and rigid. It's free-flowing. I have that freedom to be able to just feel where's right.

The England squad announcements now always seem to list you as a midfielder. Is that how you see yourself in the team?
Yeah, I think so. For England, I'd say I'm now a midfielder and that's something that really excites me and gives me the opportunity to get into the team. I think if it's working, then long term I don't see a reason to change that. You've got to judge it all off performances and the results.

Have there been many other teams this season who've stood out to you tactically?
Probably the most interesting team over the last year or two in the Premier League have been Brighton. When I'm able to watch one of their games, it's always entertaining and free-flowing football. The way that they build up and play out from the back is exceptional and really brave.

Is Brighton's approach just as enjoyable to play against, though?
Oh, it was an absolute nightmare to try to stop it! Yeah, that's a very, very difficult game.

It's probably too far away to think about, but given how you've learned and adapted, have you ever envisaged becoming a coach in the future?
Er... [*thinks*]... no, I haven't, not yet anyway. In fairness, it's something I'd never rule out as the passion I've got for football is something I'll never lose. Potentially further down the line, I could see that happening, but I've still got loads of learning to do within the game. Hopefully there's still hundreds of matches left for me to play, so I'm excited about that first and foremost. Then, who knows what will happen about management?

WATCH THE INTERVIEW



Scan the code to watch more tactical analysis videos, including Adam's exclusive interview with Alexander-Arnold in full, on FFT's YouTube page



MARY QUEEN OF STOPS

Mary Earps hasn't enjoyed a smooth journey to the top, but she captured the hearts of a nation during the 2023 Women's World Cup thanks to all manner of sensational saves and some particularly impressive swearing, too...

Words Jessy Parker Humphreys

Two years ago, Mary Earps was contemplating retirement. At 28, she was Manchester United's first-choice goalkeeper but falling down the pecking order for England. Having sat on the bench for the 2019 World Cup, she didn't even make Hege Riise's Great Britain squad for the Tokyo Olympics. The starting spot went to Ellie Roebuck, aged just 21, supported by 23-year-old Sandy MacIver and 34-year-old Carly Telford, a late replacement for the injured Karen Bardsley.

Fast forward two years and Earps is widely recognised as the best goalkeeper on the planet, after her stellar performances at the 2023 World Cup. In October she came fifth in the Ballon d'Or, the highest position ever for a female goalkeeper. Weeks earlier, her Lionesses replica shirt sold out within hours. All told, it hasn't been a bad year...

The rapid acceleration of Earps' career is inextricably linked to the appointment of a certain England manager. "The reality is my life before Sarina Wiegman and my life after Sarina Wiegman have been totally different," Earps admitted at the beginning of this year. When the Dutch boss took over in September 2021, she not only restored Earps to the England squad, but instantly made her the team's first-choice goalkeeper.

It was a decisive change that took many by surprise. But Earps has barely missed a minute since Wiegman's arrival, helping England to win a European Championship and reach their first World Cup final.

During the Euros, England's breathtaking attacking often took the headlines; top scorer Beth Mead even won BBC Sports Personality of the Year at the end of 2022. Earps went under the radar, yet she was vital on several occasions, making two important saves early in the semi-final against Sweden.

But by the time England reached the 2023 World Cup Final, Earps was an undisputed star. Mead and Fran Kirby being absent with injuries weakened the Lionesses' attack and increased the pressure on a defence that was also missing injured captain Leah Williamson. Suddenly, Earps was keeping them in games.

In the opening group game against Haiti, Earps was forced to make a number of saves to preserve England's 1-0 lead. In the last 16 against Nigeria, with the Lionesses down to 10 players after a red card for Lauren James, she did much to keep the game scoreless and take it to a penalty shootout. Facing up to a goalkeeper who exuded confidence and self-belief, Nigeria missed the target with two of their spot-kicks and England progressed.

In the grand finale, it was Earps who gave Wiegman's side hope, when she saved Jenni Hermoso's 69th-minute penalty with Spain leading 1-0. Ultimately the Lionesses were unable to capitalise on that moment, but the 30-year-old's heroics had cemented her status as the team's star of the tournament.

Her success was built on the platform given to her at Manchester United, where she had arrived in 2019 ahead of their first season in the WSL and immediately become their No.1 goalkeeper, remaining ever-present since.

Up to then, Earps had yet to find herself a footballing home. She'd never spent more than three years at a club, and was returning to England after a year finding appearances hard to come by with German champions Wolfsburg. Previously, she had constantly switched between English sides, starting at Leicester and hometown club Nottingham Forest, prior to spells at Doncaster Belles, Birmingham, Bristol Academy and Reading. Often, she was competing towards the bottom of the table. It must have been hard to imagine the heights she could reach with Manchester United, a team that didn't even exist a year before she joined the club.

With Earps in goal, they've gone from new kids on the block to genuine contenders. She played a pivotal role as they reached their first FA Cup final and finished second in the WSL last term, going toe-to-toe with Chelsea in the title race until the final day. Thanks to her 14 clean sheets – a new WSL record – they qualified for the Champions League, and although United didn't advance to the 16-team group stage, Earps was in goal for their first ever European fixture, against PSG.



Above Behold: the greatest potty mouth in world football

Earps' leadership at Manchester United has been even more crucial since the departures of Alessia Russo and Ona Batlle. She is the senior figure within the dressing room, and her never-say-die attitude is irresistible. In November, with United trailing Brighton 2-1 in the 98th minute, Earps trotted up for a corner which resulted in an equaliser from Rachel Williams. "Mary ran up to me before the corner," said Williams afterwards. "She was a bit aggressive, actually – she was like, 'Rach, get on this'."

It's that intensity that has endeared her to the public. Earps has become well-known for being outspoken. When it was revealed that Nike weren't planning to sell replicas of her World Cup goalkeeper shirt, Earps was quick to call them out, saying that "on a personal level, it is hugely hurtful".

She was supported by fellow England stars. "Mary's the best in the world," stated Mead. "If people want to buy her shirt, then they need to make it possible – end of." The public pressure forced the retailer to finally put the kits on sale in early October, and the limited run sold out within hours.

Earps' raw honesty is typical of the shot-stopper, who had also gained praise for her speech when she collected The Best FIFA Women's Goalkeeper award in 2022. "This is for anybody who has ever been in a dark place – just know that there's light at the end of the tunnel," she said. "Keep going. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. Sometimes success looks like this, receiving trophies; sometimes it's simply waking up and putting one step in front of the other. There's only one of you in the world, and that's more than good enough. Be unapologetically yourself." Her willingness to show vulnerability on stage was a sign of how well she has managed the remarkable ups and downs she's faced during her career.

Earps wasn't afraid to show her personality in her biggest moment, either, continuing a burgeoning tradition of swearing in major finals, pioneered by Jill Scott at Euro 2022. This time, after the goalkeeper had saved Hermoso's spot-kick in Sydney, the cameras zoomed in on her angrily yelling the most heartfelt "F**k off!" you're ever likely to see in your life. Fittingly, you can get it printed on a T-shirt now, too.

At the start of the year, Earps said she had "no idea" how she'd be able to beat 2022. But beat it she did, finishing 2023 in an even more impressive place than 12 months ago.

She still has a number of years ahead of her at the top and, with her contract due to expire at the season's end, plenty of options to explore. Arsenal submitted a bid over the summer, reported to be a world-record figure for a goalkeeper. Manchester United rejected it out of hand. The bid and the rejection of it were both indications of how valuable she is viewed these days.

A footballer can reach great heights when trusted by those around them. Mary Earps did not become the world's best goalkeeper overnight, but feeling emboldened enabled her to become a leader for both Manchester United and England over the last two years.

In the past, the position of goalkeeper was often derided in the women's game. Led by Earps, players are forcing opinions to change. She is unapologetically herself.

FOOTBALL'S FINEST SWEARERS

Earps wasn't the first to be caught on TV going all industrial



JILL SCOTT

As extra time approached in the Euro 2022 Final, the veteran was summoned as an enforcer – and not just in a physical sense. Arguing with Sydney Lohmann, supersub Scott told the German, "F**k off, you f**king prick". England's terrified opponents duly succumbed to defeat. "The camera angle was very unfortunate," sighed Scott, insisting that Lohmann had sworn first.



JOE KINNEAR

How to win friends and influence people: go on the offensive at your first press conference after being appointed Newcastle's interim boss in 2008. "Which one is Simon Bird?" asked Kinnear. "Me," replied the *Mirror* journalist. "You're a c**t," said Kinnear, before telling Niall Hickman of the *Express* to "f**k off, f**k off" during a lengthy rant. Hence the nickname: JFK.



JOHN SITTON

A 1995 film caught Sitton 'motivating' his Orient side, trailing Blackpool 1-0 at half-time. "You, you little c**t, and you, you f**king big c**t – when I tell you to do something, do it. If you come back at me, we'll have a f**king right sort-out in here. You can pair up if you like, and you can bring your f**king dinner. When I've finished with you, you'll f**king need it." Full-time: 1-0.



Back in 1991, Lucas Radebe lay wounded in his car, and only his brother's help saved his career. In his own words, the Leeds icon tells *FFT* how he escaped death's door to conquer Yorkshire, captain post-apartheid South Africa and become Nelson Mandela's hero

"IT FELT LIKE MY BACK WAS ON FIRE, AND THERE WAS BLOOD EVERYWHERE. I'D BEEN SHOT"

Interview Grant Shub

In 1991, I was living with my family in the Diepkloof zone of the township of Soweto, Johannesburg. There were four rooms in the house, and 12 of us all lived together – my parents, myself and my nine siblings. During apartheid, we weren't permitted to move away from our zone because of the Group Areas Act. Black people had to carry passes. At that time, you were essentially confined to the community in which you were living.

The township was so densely populated that you got to know everyone by name. When we grew up, my friends and I used to *toyi-toyi*, stomping our feet and chanting in the streets to demand freedom of education, speech and democracy. We were also mischievous, and there were times when things got out of hand. Although our community adopted a culture of togetherness – *Ubuntu*, we called it – it was also a violent and dangerous place. Guns were in the wrong hands.

When I was just 15 years old, because of rioting in Soweto, my parents shipped me off to Bophuthatswana, a region that spread across the Cape Province, Orange Free State and Transvaal, and had been declared an independent state. By 1991, though, I was in my early 20s and had returned to Soweto. My mother Emily ran a spaza shop, making a living by selling convenience items like food and drinks to the locals in our area.

That day had started just like any other. As usual, I was heading off to buy drinks in bulk, which my mother would then resell. I was going about my business a few blocks from my house, when I heard a loud bang. It felt like my back was on fire. I was in the car with my younger brother Lazarus, and suddenly my leg went numb. I realised I'd been shot. I saw blood all over the seat.

I thought I'd become yet another victim of gun violence. Many of my childhood friends died or were sent to jail. When my brother rushed me to hospital, I feared I was going to be paralysed for the rest of my life. But, miraculously, when the doctors started to examine me, they found the bullet had only gone through the flesh and managed to miss all of my vital organs.

Not a lot of people would have survived that – I was extremely fortunate to be alive. After nearly losing my life, you'd imagine an investigation would have been launched, but there was no follow-up from the police. They turned a blind eye to violent crime.

When I was recovering from surgery in the hospital, my first question to the doctors was, "Am I going to be able to play football again?" In the township, football had always been our escape from the hardships of life. It was the one thing we loved.

Playing street football was how our parents knew that we were safe, because moving outside of your community was too risky. As a boy, I was skinny and malnourished. We didn't have a nutritious diet, proper facilities, fields or kit, but we honed our talent on the roads. The elders in our community coached us, forming teams in which we began playing organised football.

Bophuthatswana was where I first started playing football properly. At the time I had a big afro hairstyle, which was the trend, and I started out as a goalkeeper for my club, ICL Birds. I stayed in goal until I got kicked in the face! I broke several teeth, my tongue was almost ripped in half and my lips and nose suffered lacerations. It was terrible. When I returned, I played as a centre-back instead.

It was in the heart of defence that I was spotted by some scouts from Kaizer Chiefs, a huge club, based back in Johannesburg. The late Pule 'Ace' Ntsoelengoe recognised my talent and Kaizer Motaung, the founder of Kaizer Chiefs, contacted my parents.

At the time, I was studying at college to become a teacher, because mum and dad insisted I have an education. Sometimes I got into trouble, as my parents didn't want me out playing football. Once I received the opportunity to trial at Kaizer Chiefs, though, I needed to take it. My studies were cut short, but I was meant to play football.

A year after I joined Kaizer Chiefs, South Africa changed for the better. On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from Victor Verster Prison in Cape Town. That was a seismic moment for our country. During my school days we'd sing, "Release Mandela", but we didn't know what he looked like as the apartheid government hid his identity from us. There was so much censorship back in those years.

When Madiba's day of release eventually arrived, everything stopped in the country. I remember that day very clearly. We spent it all over the township's streets, then glued to our televisions. We wanted to make sure we caught sight of the person whose image we'd been chanting about. I felt relieved when I saw Mandela walking hand in hand with his wife, Winnie. There was a sense that we'd achieved something as a nation. It was an absolutely fantastic time for South Africa and opportunities started to open up.

Throughout our sporting isolation, which only ended in 1992, we weren't able to play in big competitions around the world. That same year, however, I made my debut for Bafana Bafana against Cameroon, the first game after readmission to FIFA. We won that historic match 1-0 in Durban, a watershed moment in South African sport.

Phil Masinga led the line that day. Apartheid was abolished once and for all in South Africa in '94, and not long after the first mixed-race elections were held, myself and Phil moved to England to join Leeds. I'd known beforehand that they were interested in signing me, but they actually travelled to South Africa to see

Clockwise from below Lucas led Leeds with such pride; Bafana Bafana success; Nelson with his hero and some guy called David



Phil – on both occasions when their chief scout Geoff Sleight visited, I didn't play due to injury. Great respect to Geoff and Howard Wilkinson, who took a chance on me and snapped me up without watching me play. Someone must have whispered a few positive things in their ear about me!

When I signed for Leeds, it was a difficult introduction to English football. The change of environment was a shock to my system. It was my first time travelling that far away from South Africa, leaving everybody I knew at home. It was hard to adapt to the weather and the football culture.

Games were very physical and the tempo was high. When I joined, I felt like Howard treated Phil and I harshly. Playing under him was particularly tough – I recall him saying, "This isn't South Africa," and ordering us to "work harder". When Howard and his coach Mick Hennigan spoke, it could be quite scary. I wasn't used to their management methods.





"NELSON MANDELA SAW ME AND SAID, 'THIS IS MY HERO'. THAT'S A MOMENT I WILL CHERISH FOREVER"

Early on at Leeds, I panicked and made mistakes in games. Phil and I both worked really hard, but he got into the team first. He played brilliantly, scored a hat-trick and the Leeds supporters came up with the nickname 'Waltzing Masinga' for him. I usually sat on the bench and would be ice-cold from head to toe. At some grounds, it was freezing and I couldn't cope with it.

The training sessions were also challenging. At Kaizer Chiefs, we used to train from 4pm until 6pm for three days, then play a match. Leeds trained in the morning through to the afternoon every day, which was demanding. I had a pretty shaky first season. I damaged my knee ligaments and underwent a big ACL operation. When Phil returned home to South Africa during the summer, I stayed behind in Yorkshire to work with the club's physios.

When Wilkinson was sacked in September 1996, I'd recovered and was doing well. I'd also been part of the side that won the Africa Cup of Nations earlier that year, which was massive for South Africa.

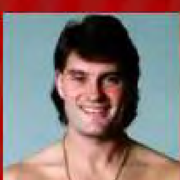
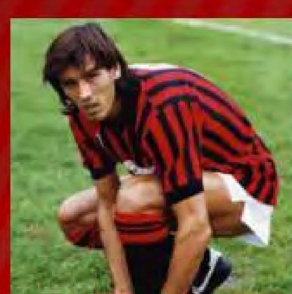
Later, I was named captain of the national team for the 1998 World Cup in France, and Leeds skipper too. In 2001, Mandela visited Leeds' city hall – when he saw me, he said, "Ah, this is my hero." Wow! I get goosebumps when I think back to that. That's a moment in my life I will cherish forever. I had a huge lump in my throat and didn't know what to say. By the time I looked again, Madiba had already strolled past. For me, Mandela wasn't simply one of the great statesmen for South Africa, but for the world as a whole.

In my 70th and final appearance for Bafana Bafana in 2003, we played a friendly against England in Durban. We were so proud to take on that team, led by David Beckham, and before the match, both sides were invited to meet Mandela. On the wall at home, I've still got a framed picture of Becks and myself with Madiba – David was holding Mandela's left hand, I was shaking his right hand. We lost 2-1 in front of 50,000 fans, but the game was a brilliant send-off for me, at the end of my international career.

It was always special for me to represent South Africa, and I was honoured to become the first South African to captain a Premier League club. It was a great responsibility, which changed who I was and how I looked at life and football. I didn't fully realise what it meant until I returned home and saw the reaction of the media and the people within my community.

No one can ever take all of those moments away from me. Had I been a bit less fortunate when that bullet struck me in 1991, I might never have had the opportunity to experience any of it.








30 BEST BRITISH PLAYERS ABROAD

England has often been one of football's most attractive destinations, particularly in the Premier League era. But while plenty of foreign superstars have made a home on these shores, numerous British sensations have headed in the opposite direction. Here are the finest of them, ranked solely by their contributions overseas...













Above Gazza was adored at Lazio, despite his moments of gladiatorism proving limited

30 BRADLEY WRIGHT-PHILLIPS

After productive spells in League One and the Championship, Wright-Phillips joined New York Red Bulls in 2013. By the time he retired in 2021, the striker had scored 117 goals in MLS (including eight for LAFC and one for Columbus Crew), making him one of the top marksmen in the league's history.

29 TAMMY ABRAHAM

Roma forked out £34m for the Chelsea striker in the summer of 2021 – he then struck 27 goals in all competitions in his first Giallorossi campaign, winning the Europa Conference League. His second was less successful, but still yielded 14 Europa League appearances as the Italians lost out to Sevilla in the final.

28 ASHLEY YOUNG

Inter bought Young in January 2020 and he soon became a regular under Antonio Conte, who employed the ex-Manchester United man at wing-back. Inter were runners-up to Villarreal in the Europa League that season, followed by the then 35-year-old winning Serie A in his only full campaign at San Siro.

27 CHRIS SMALLING

After slipping down the Manchester United pecking order, Smalling joined Roma in 2019. His initial loan made permanent, Smalling revived his career at the Stadio Olimpico and proved an influential part of the team that won the 2021-22 Europa Conference League under Jose Mourinho, his old United gaffer.

26 RAY WILKINS

Manchester United midfielder Wilkins joined Milan in 1984 in an era when the Rossoneri sought to re-establish themselves among the Serie A elite, reaching the 1985 Coppa Italia Final. 'Butch' later had a brief PSG spell. "You were special, a gentleman," said the great Franco Baresi after Wilkins' 2018 death.

25 PAUL GASCOIGNE

"I'm pleased for Paul, but it's like watching your mother-in-law drive off a cliff in your new car," said Spurs supremo Terry Venables when Gascoigne signed for Lazio. Gazza's time in Serie A was mixed, but he showed flashes of his remarkable quality and was wholeheartedly embraced by Eagles ultras.













24 STEVE ARCHIBALD

Signed by Terry Venables' Barcelona in 1984, Archibald scored 15 league goals as the club ended an 11-year title drought in his maiden season. The Scot started the 1986 European Cup Final defeat to Steaua Bucharest but fell out of favour. He later spent a campaign with rivals Espanyol and still lives in Catalonia now.

23 FIKAYO TOMORI

Aged 23 in January 2021, Chelsea's Tomori rocked up at Milan in search of regular game time, disappointing many Blues supporters. The centre-back quickly became a starter for the Rossoneri, who know quality defenders when they see one. He won Serie A in his first full season, featuring in the team of the year.

22 MARK HATELEY

Milan paid Portsmouth £1m for Hateley in 1984. The striker netted 21 goals in three San Siro seasons, alongside compatriot Ray Wilkins, but Milan went trophyless. Arsene Wenger brought Hateley to Monaco and the rough-and-tumble frontman hit 14 Ligue 1 goals en route to title triumph in 1987-88.

21 TONY WOODCOCK

Nottingham Forest's Woodcock impressed Köln when they met in the 1978-79 European Cup semis. The Billy Goats promptly signed the Mick Hucknall lookalike, who enjoyed two stints with the club, scoring 39 goals in 130 Bundesliga games. He ended his career with Fortuna Köln, a smaller side in the same city.

Above "Incey, when we said you'd love the Italian food, we meant pasta..."

20 GERRY HITCHENS

A seven-cap England international, scoring five times, Hitchens was prolific for Aston Villa between 1957 and 1961. The forward then averaged a shade under a goal every other game at Inter before moving to Torino in November 1962. He spent eight seasons in Italy with spells at Atalanta and Cagliari.

19 PAUL INCE

Bombed out of Manchester United by Alex Ferguson, Ince signed for Inter in 1995. The team struggled in his debut campaign, but the self-styled midfield 'Guv'nor' performed well and was more impressive in 1996-97 as the Nerazzurri reached the UEFA Cup final, only to lose a penalty shootout to Schalke.













18 GRAEME SOUNESS

Sampdoria snapped up Souey from Liverpool in 1984, finishing fourth in the league and lifting a first Coppa Italia – the Scot scoring a first-leg winner – in his debut season. Samp narrowly avoided relegation the following year, but reached another cup final. "I found the football easy," he sniffed. Modest, too.

17 JOHN COLLINS

After 11 years in his native Scotland, smooth midfielder Collins joined Monaco in 1996 and helped the club capture the Ligue 1 title in his debut season, finishing 12 points clear of PSG. Alongside Fabien Barthez, Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet, Collins & Co advanced to the Champions League semi-finals in 1997-98.

Above The princely Collins surveys his new Monaco domain

16 KIERAN TRIPPIER

Trippier left Tottenham for Atletico Madrid in the summer of 2019, having just lost the Champions League final against Liverpool. An immediate success under Diego Simeone, the right-back bagged La Liga in 2020-21, his second season, supplying six assists despite a 10-week ban over betting irregularities.

15 JADON SANCHO

Academy starlet Sancho left Manchester City before making a single senior appearance, upping sticks for Borussia Dortmund where he became one of Europe's hottest football properties. Sancho delivered 50 goals and 58 assists for BVB, including a brace against RB Leipzig in a victorious 2021 DFB-Pokal Final.

14 TREVOR FRANCIS

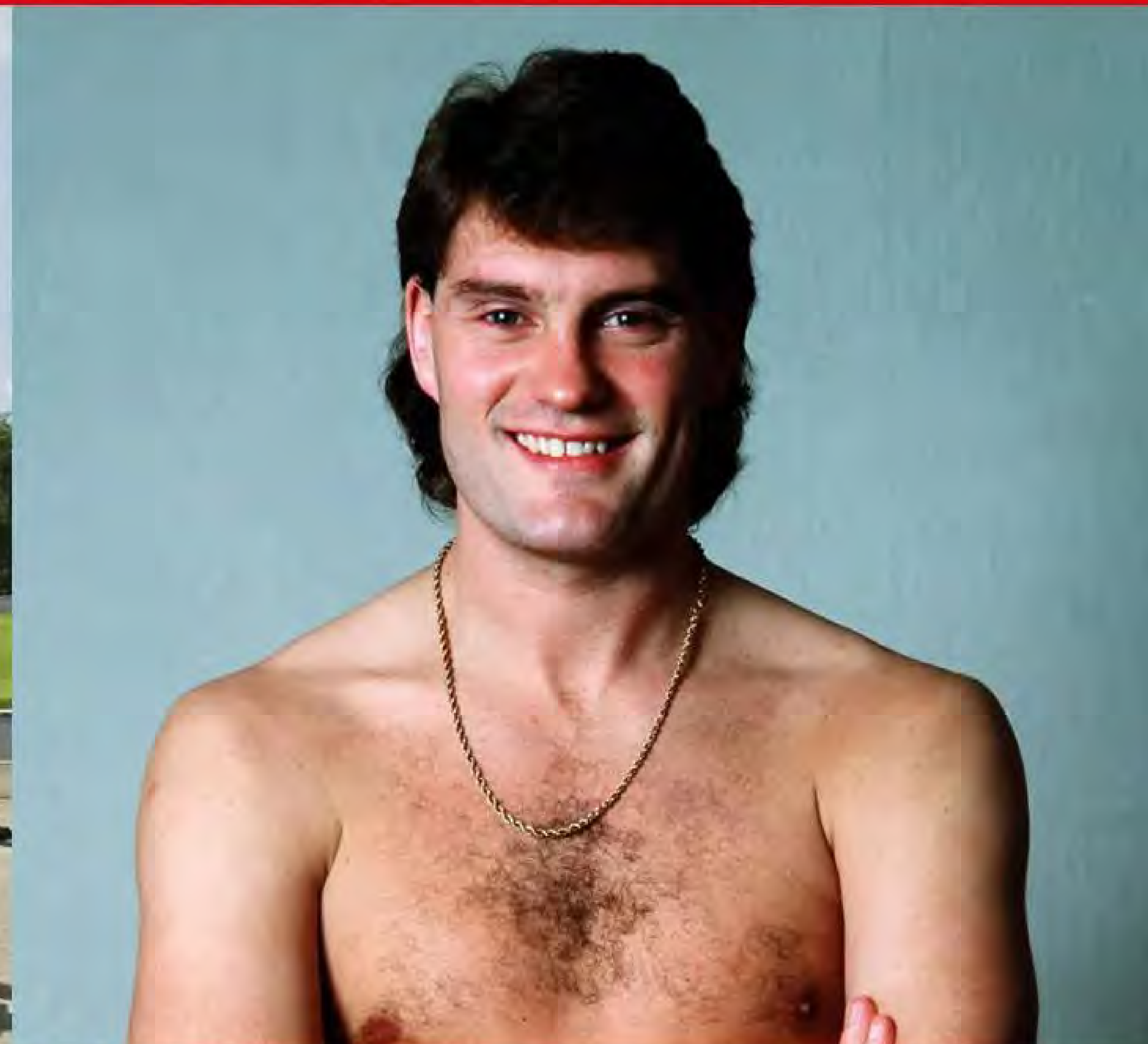
The £700,000 Sampdoria spent on Francis in 1982 delivered the Coppa Italia three years later, the club's first major honour. He spent 1986-87 at Atalanta. "We thought English strikers weren't very mobile but Trevor proved us very wrong," admitted former Samp team-mate Gianluca Vialli. "He was my inspiration."

13 LAURIE CUNNINGHAM

One-third of West Brom's 'Three Degrees', Cunningham became the first Briton to play for Real Madrid in 1979, winning La Liga and two Copas del Rey but falling just short in the 1981 European Cup Final. The wideman also represented Sporting Gijon, Marseille, Rayo Vallecano (twice) and Belgian side Charleroi.













Above "Hey, Jude, did you think it would be this easy?"

12 PAUL LAMBERT

Lambert was a surprise pick-up for Borussia Dortmund in 1996 after a three-year spell at Motherwell. The Scottish midfielder's time at the Westfalenstadion was short but so sweet. Lambert made 43 appearances in his only full season at BVB, which concluded with the club hoisting the Champions League trophy aloft.

11 DAVID BECKHAM

Becks called time on his Manchester United career in 2003, moving to Real Madrid to be the latest Galactico. After a testing period, he showed his worth to boss Fabio Capello and won La Liga in 2006-07, his final Bernabeu campaign. Beckham then revitalised MLS at LA Galaxy and spent loans at Milan and PSG.

10 DAVID PLATT

Platt represented three clubs in his four years in Serie A after impressing at Italia 90. The midfielder was one of the few bright spots in Bari's 1991-92 relegation, earning himself a move to Juventus where he won the UEFA Cup in a solitary 12 months. Two Sampdoria seasons brought Coppa Italia glory in 1994.

09 OWEN HARGREAVES

Born in Canada, Hargreaves didn't actually start playing football seriously until he was 15. A year later Bayern Munich snapped him up, and at 19 he was playing for the German giants' first team. Hargreaves amassed 218 Roten appearances, winning four Bundesliga titles as well as the 2001 Champions League.

08 JUDE BELLINGHAM

Despite Premier League interest, Bellingham swapped Birmingham for Borussia Dortmund in 2020. Within three years, lifting the DFB-Pokal in 2021, the all-action midfielder was one of the world's finest players. He scored 13 times in his first 13 Real Madrid matches after joining Los Blancos over the summer.

07 GLENN HODDLE

One of the most talented English footballers ever, Hoddle was never fully appreciated in his homeland, which prompted a 1987 move to Monaco. Under Arsene Wenger, Hoddle starred in les Monegasques' Ligue 1 title win in his first season and scored 30 goals in 87 games before returning to England in 1991.













06 GARY LINEKER

After winning the Golden Boot at the 1986 World Cup, Lineker joined Terry Venables' Barcelona from Everton for £2.8m. The future crisp botherer plundered 52 goals in three Camp Nou seasons, winning the Copa del Rey and Cup Winners' Cup. He later played for Japanese outfit Nagoya Grampus Eight.

05 STEVE McMANAMAN

Known as the "versatile Englishman" in the Spanish capital, 'Macca' spent four glorious years at Real Madrid, which delivered two La Liga titles, two Champions Leagues and a spectacular volley in the 2000 final. "He was exemplary – a fantastic player in every sense," beamed coach Vicente del Bosque.

Above Mighty Mouse's even mightier perm dazzled at HSV

04 CHRIS WADDLE

More than three decades on from his Stade Velodrome exit, Waddle still doesn't have to buy a drink in Marseille. A fans' favourite at l'OM, the tricky wideman won three Ligue 1 titles and reached a European Cup final. In 1998, he was named the second-best player in the club's history behind Jean-Pierre Papin.

03 KEVIN KEEGAN

In 1977, Keegan left European champions Liverpool for Hamburg, who hadn't won the Bundesliga since its 1963 inception. Just two years later, Die Rothosen were champions of Germany for the first time in 19 years. 'Mighty Mouse' also led his side to the 1980 European Cup Final and twice won the Ballon d'Or there.

02 GARETH BALE

Real Madrid paid a world-record £85.1m fee to land Bale in 2013. He had problems with a section of the fanbase and local media, but the Welshman's achievements speak for themselves. Bale played 258 games, scored 106 goals and won a whopping 15 major trophies, including five Champions Leagues.

01 JOHN CHARLES

Juventus paid a then-British record £65,000 fee to sign Charles from Leeds in 1957 – the Welshman was worth every single shilling. Charles, who could play at centre-forward or centre-back, scored 105 goals in 179 outings for the Old Lady, winning three Serie A titles and two Coppas Italia before a stint at Roma.

FOOTBALL, BLOODY HELL

Sir Alex Ferguson almost emigrated to Canada aged 21 – instead, he became Britain's greatest football manager. Twenty-five years since his finest hour, Martin Edwards and others tell *FFT* the inside story of a legendary career

Words Chris Flanagan
Additional reporting Ryan Baldi, Kenny Millar



R

emember, remember, the 5th of November. On that 1986 night, a plot took place – not involving gunpowder or Guy Fawkes, but Bobby Charlton and the boss of Aberdeen Football Club, on the outskirts of Glasgow.

A day earlier, Manchester United had lost 4-1 at Southampton in the third round of the League Cup – a loss in which an 18-year-old Matt Le Tissier plundered the first two senior goals of his career. The Red Devils sat fourth bottom of the First Division, and the board decided time was up for gaffer Ron Atkinson.

The man they wanted to replace him was Alex Ferguson, but they needed to sound out their target, without Atkinson or Aberdeen finding out. "We had to contact him to find out if he wanted to come, before we made the official approach," Martin Edwards, the club's long-serving former chairman, tells *FFT* of the initial phone call that took place that afternoon. "If I just rang them up and said, 'It's Martin Edwards from Manchester United', we thought they might not put me through to him. So our director Mike Edelson spoke to Aberdeen's switchboard, pretending to be Gordon Strachan's agent. They put him on."

Sat in his office, and thinking he was about to answer a call from Alan Gordon, a man he knew extremely well, Ferguson began the conversation with the words, "How are you doing, you ugly bugger?"

He soon realised the man on the other end of the phone was putting on a fake Scottish accent, before Edelson passed the phone to Edwards, to enquire whether Ferguson was interested in meeting to discuss a possible move to Old Trafford.

"He agreed, so we travelled up by car, the whole of the board, and met at a motorway service station," continues Edwards. At 7pm, attempting not to be detected under the cover of darkness, the chairman sneaked out of a vehicle containing Edelson, Charlton and fellow director Maurice Watkins, and into Ferguson's car at Hamilton Services on the M74. The two cars headed 15 miles to Bishopbriggs, just north of Glasgow, and the house of the Aberdeen chief's sister-in-law.

There, the five men reached agreement on an appointment that would change football history, and transform Ferguson into the most successful British manager of all time.

NO, CANADA

Forty-five years earlier, the Scot had fittingly been born in Fergie Time – in the final few moments of 1941, on December 31. As an ambitious young forward, he'd nearly moved to Canada when he found first-team football difficult to come by at St Johnstone. "I got the papers to emigrate," he revealed. "I put them in a drawer in the house while I made my mind up."

He never signed them – injuries offered him a surprise recall to the team against Rangers at Ibrox, and he hit a hat-trick, later joining the Gers and notching for them in the Fairs Cup, having done the same for Dunfermline. In 1967, he netted three times in his only four appearances for Scotland – one match against Israel, three against Australia, during a summer tour. The ties weren't recognised as internationals until 2021, when Ferguson was finally awarded his caps.

Blamed for not preventing Billy McNeill's opener in Rangers' 4-0 defeat to Celtic in the 1969 Scottish Cup Final, watched by 132,000 at Hampden Park, he was frozen out – his wife's reluctance to move to England meant he snubbed Nottingham Forest and joined second-tier Falkirk, where another vitriolic exit provided the fuel for his dugout career.

Ferguson was the player-coach when John Prentice became boss and stripped him of his coaching role. It prompted him to finish his playing days at Ayr under Ally MacLeod, who recommended him for the manager's job at minnows East Stirlingshire, aged only 32. Soon, came a meeting with Prentice's Falkirk. "I spent weeks building my players up for that," said Ferguson, keen for revenge. East Stirlingshire won 2-0, their first victory over their neighbours for 70 years.

Impressively sitting near the top of Division Two in October, the Scot was approached by St Mirren, who were surprisingly below them in the table. "He rang his great pal Jock Stein and said, 'What should I do? Should I leave for a worse team?'," says Patrick Barclay, the respected author who published a Ferguson biography in 2010. "Stein told him, 'Go to the highest point of East Stirling's main stand, do the same at St Mirren, and that will give you your answer'. Ferguson realised that you go for potential, what a club can be made into."

Departing East Stirlingshire after 117 days, Ferguson turned St Mirren into a youthful side that ascended to the top flight – from the start, he'd been keen to give emerging players





Above A sprightly Sir Alex was frozen out after Rangers' Old Firm rout in the Scottish Cup final



"HE CREATED A SIEGE MENTALITY AT THE CLUB. YOU HAD A FEELING YOU COULDN'T FAIL UNDER HIM"

a chance. "I played a pre-season friendly and didn't think I'd done particularly well, but he produced the forms and signed me on the journey back," remembers Billy Stark, then an 18-year-old midfielder. "He saw something in me. He also had an unbelievable drive to be successful – that stuck out a mile. If you didn't give everything for him, you wouldn't be there for very long."

Ferguson was first approached by Aberdeen in 1977 but rebuffed their offer. A year later, after Billy McNeill guided the Dons to second in the league and left for Celtic, he was asked again and moved to Pittodrie – although not before St Mirren got wind of the approach and sacked him for breach of contract.

His first European fixture as a boss ended with defeat at Bulgarian side Marek Stanke Dimitrov, and Aberdeen finished fourth in his first campaign at the helm. In March of the following season, they sat sixth, before an incredible 15-game unbeaten run saw them surge to the title for only the second time in their history. A Scottish Cup triumph followed in 1982, then their greatest ever achievement 12 months later – beating a Real Madrid side managed by Alfredo Di Stefano in the Cup Winners' Cup final. Along the way, Aberdeen had defeated Bayern Munich, who'd eased past Spurs in the previous round. "Ferguson unlocked Aberdeen's potential and formed a terrifying fighting unit," says Barclay. "When Bayern lined up in the tunnel, they thought, 'Jesus, we're playing a bunch of savages'."

Above Ferguson built a 'terrifying fighting unit' as Aberdeen ruled Scottish football

Ten days after tasting European glory in Gothenburg, the squad were reminded not to rest on their laurels when Ferguson tore into them over their display in the Scottish Cup final, even though they beat Rangers 1-0. The following season, they sunk Hamburg in the Super Cup, lifted the Scottish Cup again and romped to the league by seven points. The year after that, they won the title again, by seven points again.

"He created a siege mentality at the club, making everyone feel like the rest of the world was underestimating them," reveals Stark, who joined Aberdeen from St Mirren in 1983. "Maybe some of his rants were impulsive, but I think the vast majority were premeditated. You had a feeling you couldn't fail under him.

"He was great at working out what made individual players tick. People talk about the hairdryer as if he had one approach, but that does him a disservice. Willie Miller was the worst trainer in the world and I kept thinking Sir Alex was going to blow up at him, but he never said anything – and Willie was the best player every Saturday. Sir Alex understood everyone was different, and if you got a 'well done' from him, you were ecstatic. You knew you'd earned it."

The 1985-86 season was more challenging, in the league at least. Aberdeen bagged both domestic cups but slipped back to fourth in the Premier Division as Ferguson, invited to become Jock Stein's assistant for Scotland's World Cup qualifying campaign, had to step in as interim boss when his mentor collapsed and died at their final qualifier in September.

A December trip to Australia confirmed the Tartan Army's progress to Mexico 86 via an intercontinental play-off, but they lost their opening two matches to Denmark and West Germany and failed to make it out of the group. "The tournament didn't go well at all," says Barclay. "It never does for Scotland, but there was no massive demand for Ferguson to get the job on a permanent basis." ▸

"THEY OFFERED HIM A SUNBED"

Ferguson didn't crave the Scotland job long term anyway, sensing it was time for a move to England. Sheffield United and Wolves had approached him at the start of the 1980s – the former had just dropped into the Fourth Division, while Wolves were trying to stave off relegation from the top flight and made Ferguson wary. He was right to be: financial problems meant Wanderers too were soon in the Fourth Division.

In 1983, he rejected Rangers, unwilling to return to the club he felt treated him badly as a player. Aston Villa also failed to tempt him south, and talks to join Tottenham broke down when they offered him a three-year deal rather than five. Arsenal weren't willing to wait until after the World Cup in Mexico when discussions were held in the spring of 1986 – Ferguson was even interviewed by Barcelona, as Terry Venables looked like he might leave the Camp Nou. In the end, El Tel decided to stay put.

By then, Bobby Charlton was also keeping tabs on the Scot. "Bobby was part of the BBC team at the World Cup," explains Barclay. "Arthur Albiston played for both Manchester United and Scotland, and was surprised that Bobby spent so much time with the Scotland side, asking things like, 'How's the training?'"

When Manchester United decided to part with Ron Atkinson that November, there was no doubt who they wanted to succeed him. "Not really – I made up my mind fairly quickly that he was the one," Martin Edwards tells *FFT*. "I'd met him when we were trying to buy Gordon Strachan in 1984, and was impressed with the way he went about his work. When I put his name to the other directors, there was no one in disagreement. Mike Edelson suggested we should perhaps consider Terry Venables, but I'd made up my mind on Alex and was backed by the board. Once we met him and he indicated that he was prepared to come, it was just a question of negotiation. Maurice Watkins and I flew north the next day to speak to the Aberdeen chairman, and see Alex to agree terms."



Above Sizing up the scale of the task to revive the Red Devils

"WE HAD FAITH SUCCESS WOULD COME, BUT I'M GLAD IT ARRIVED WHEN IT DID TO EASE PRESSURE"

That day, Atkinson's sacking was confirmed, swiftly followed by the news of Ferguson's appointment. "We were on the same page," says Edwards. "It had been 19 years since we'd won the league – we'd had five years under Ron and never been out of the top four, but apart from one season didn't really look like winning the league. That was our target. Liverpool were the dominant team, so the first thing we had to do was match them."

Ferguson was well aware of how good Liverpool were, having lost 4-0 at Anfield with Aberdeen in the European Cup in 1980. As he'd later explain, "My greatest challenge was knocking Liverpool right off their f**king perch" – like when he joined St Mirren, he knew his new club had potential to improve.

He lost his first game 2-0 at Oxford – when they drew the next fixture 0-0 at Norwich, they slipped to second bottom of the league. The side's lack of physicality led to further losses against Luton and Wimbledon, but they recovered to 11th and showed signs of promise by beating Liverpool twice.

In his first full season, Manchester United encouragingly finished second, though the progress didn't last – Ferguson had missed out to Liverpool on signing Peter Beardsley, then kicked himself for stalling on a deal for Watford's John Barnes, when Paul Gascoigne also slipped through his fingers. "Can I go on holiday, knowing I've signed you?" Ferguson asked Gascoigne, receiving assurances before heading to Malta, deal agreed. While he was away, Tottenham upped their offer, throwing in a house, a BMW for Gascoigne's dad and a sunbed for his sister. The 21-year-old went to White Hart Lane.

That season, Spurs leapt from 13th to sixth, while Manchester United slumped back to 11th, scoring only 45 goals in 38 games. Just 23,000 turned up at Old Trafford to see them

WHAT SIR ALEX DID FOR ME BY PARK JI-SUNG

The South Korean tells Chris Evans about his seven years playing for Ferguson

Sir Alex Ferguson had a completely different image to what I saw in the media. He was kind and a very warm person. He talked to me as though I was part of his family. If somebody had a struggle, on or off the pitch, he would go to players and his door was always open.

When I joined Manchester United my English wasn't good enough to talk to others, but he'd encourage me and tell me I was doing well, to keep doing what I was doing. At the right times, he'd check to make sure I was settling in fine. That had a big impact on me.

At the end of my second season, I had an operation on my knee and missed nine or 10 months. I was very depressed and wasn't sure if I could come back, but he came to see me and said he was still thinking about me, that I was an important player at the club and that I'd return stronger than before. It touched my heart.

When we won the 2008 Champions League Final against Chelsea in Russia, he didn't pick me in the squad – we had a personal meeting on the day of the match and he explained why I'd been left out. After the game, he apologised to me – even now when I meet him, he still apologises about that particular decision.

My role naturally adapted during my time playing under him, as he got to know my strengths. One of my most famous roles was being asked to man-mark Andrea Pirlo against Milan in 2010 – we chatted before the match and he gave me a specific goal to stop Pirlo whenever we didn't have the ball. When a manager places trust in you to perform a job like that, you want to show him he's right.



face Wimbledon late in the season. Worried about a drink culture inside the club, Ferguson sold Paul McGrath and Norman Whiteside, spending big money to recruit Gary Pallister (£2.3m, a British record for a defender), Neil Webb (£1.5m), Danny Wallace (£1.2m), Paul Ince (£1m) and Mike Phelan (£750,000).

Despite that, United were 15th in January 1990 – two points above the relegation zone, depleted by injuries and eight games without a win – when they travelled to Nottingham Forest in the FA Cup third round, amid talk he could be sacked if they lost. Howard Kendall had been linked with replacing him months earlier, while there'd been speculation that Michael Knighton wanted Bobby Robson, had his takeover bid not failed in October. That season, a banner appeared at Old Trafford saying 'Three years of excuses and it's still crap ... ta-ra Fergie'.

"I spoke to him in the week leading up to the Forest game, and said that if we did lose, it wasn't going to result in the sack," clarifies Edwards. "I wanted to give him that comfort before the game.

"Coming second flattered us in 1988 – the team needed strengthening and probably his management helped us get to that position, but we weren't good enough to win the title. We were patient, particularly during 1989-90, because we'd bought five players and had to give them time to gel. He'd revamped the whole scouting system and we could see the work going on with the youth team, so we felt it was worth supporting."

Ferguson went on to clinch the FA Cup that May – his first trophy for the club, four years after his arrival. "We had faith that success would arrive, but I'm glad it arrived when it did because we were coming under pressure from fans and everyone else," says Edwards.

ZIDANE AND MICK HARFORD

That pressure had been felt by Ferguson, too. "Some journalists would take the piss out of me for backing him in the early years," says Barclay. "They'd say, 'Yet another Scot who can't make it in England'. But I remember at half-time of one game, I think it was the FA Cup semi-final at Maine Road, the manager would walk through an area where reporters had their cup of tea, and Ferguson called me a four-letter noun, beginning with a 'c' and ending with a 't'. In Scotland, that can almost be a term of endearment, so I smiled, but he stabbed his finger at me and repeated it. He didn't mean it nicely.

"Weeks later, I saw him at a game at Elland Road and did something stupid – I lost my temper with him for calling me those names. I yelled, 'I f**king defended you!', very poor behaviour from me, then I stalked off. The next season, United played in Hungary in the Cup Winners' Cup – I was thinking, 'I hope my newspaper don't send me, we'll be in the same hotel and I'll be so embarrassed in front of Ferguson'. But he entered the bar, bought the journalists a drink and said, 'What would you like, Paddy?' The spat had been forgotten.

"Many years later, someone showed me the article that may have irked him – I'd written something like 'Matters at Old Trafford seem to be slipping out of Ferguson's control'. It was the word 'control', because control was the most important thing to him. He learned that from Matt Busby – although Busby was a less spiky man, he believed in control, and Ferguson believed in it almost religiously."







Top His maiden match in charge ended in defeat against Oxford **Above** King Eric completed the jigsaw as United dominated the domestic game

Winning the 1991 Cup Winners' Cup Final served to reinforce that control further. Like at Aberdeen, Ferguson did it by defeating a Clasico giant managed by a legend of the game, in this case Johan Cruyff's Barcelona. A year later, he came agonisingly close to winning the league – top with four matches to go, Manchester United lost the next three and were gazumped by Leeds. Ferguson later said the Red Devils would have triumphed if he'd pushed harder to sign Luton's 33-year-old targetman Mick Harford, to give them another option on a poor Old Trafford pitch.

In November 1992, Ferguson signed Eric Cantona, a very different sort of player, and the jigsaw was complete – within months, United had clinched their first league title for 26 years, and their manager had confirmed himself as an Old Trafford legend.

Busby, the club's previous title-winning boss and a mentor as club president, lived just long enough to see it, passing away midway through a 1993-94 campaign that delivered a league and cup Double. After they lost the league to Blackburn and the FA Cup final to Everton in 1995, though, Ferguson made the surprise decision to flog Mark Hughes, Paul Ince and Andrei Kanchelskis.

"When he let them go, I was concerned and probably expressed that to him – they were three very successful players," recalls Edwards. "OK, we'd won nothing in 1995, but we'd lost the league by one point and been in the cup final. I didn't feel as though we'd been a total failure, but he said, 'I've got all of these players coming through and I think they're ready'. It turned out to be the right thing – the next season, we did the Double with the kids in the team. He knew exactly what he was doing."

Arsenal signed Dennis Bergkamp, Liverpool recruited Stan Collymore, while Newcastle brought in Les Ferdinand and David Ginola, but Ferguson preferred not to make a single major signing. Handing David Beckham, Paul Scholes, Nicky Butt and the Neville brothers their chance, Manchester United overcame a slow start to famously overhaul Newcastle. Ferguson used the media to apply pressure, living rent-free in the mind of Kevin Keegan during the run-in. ▸

They beat Newcastle to the league again in 1997, despite the Magpies pipping them to sign Alan Shearer from Blackburn. "We'd agreed terms with Shearer, but I don't think it was necessarily him not wanting to play for us," says Edwards. "Jack Walker wouldn't allow him to come to us – he said he wasn't going to sell him unless he joined Newcastle. In France, we also had an opportunity to get Zinedine Zidane, who would have been an amazing buy for us. But I think Alex felt that if he brought Zidane in, it would annoy Eric."

To Ferguson's surprise, Cantona hung up his boots a year later, aged 30, then United lost the league to Arsenal, despite leading by 11 points at the end of February.

"THAT'S IT, I'M RESIGNING!"

Before the start of the 1998-99 season, the most famous in the history of Manchester United, came a bombshell, for those aware of it at least. Ferguson resigned. "It happened so quickly," remembers Edwards, of a frank conversation that almost went badly wrong. "I felt Alex had taken his eye off the ball the previous season – he was reported to be at race meetings, although he'd likely argue it was the break from football he needed.

"I thought maybe we shouldn't have lost the title, and we hadn't won a trophy. We'd been winning trophies consistently, so it was to try to get him back on track. He believed that was harsh, and offered his resignation one afternoon. I accepted, because that's what he'd offered, but I didn't want him to resign. By the end of the afternoon, before I'd gone home, he'd withdrawn it. I did feel initially that it probably was a reaction, and he'd come round eventually."

Ferguson was pushing for new signings that summer, in a bid to solve their problems in the Champions League. Despite winning the Cup Winners' Cup twice, his record in Europe's most prestigious competition had come in for criticism.

With Aberdeen, he'd been eliminated by Liverpool in the second round, Dynamo Berlin in the first round, then Gothenburg in the last eight. At United, he'd been knocked out by Galatasaray before the group stage in 1993, then gone out in the group in 1994, falling to Dortmund in the semis in 1997, then Monaco in the quarters in 1998.

Initially handed a kitty of around £14m, he spent just over £10m on Jaap Stam, £4m on Jesper Blomqvist, then waited until shortly before the Champions League registration deadline to sign Dwight Yorke for £12.6m in late August, so the cash could be set against the next financial year as a workaround for the club's budget. A deal to bring in Patrick Kluivert had previously collapsed.

Drawn in a horror group alongside Bayern Munich and Barcelona – containing both of the eventual finalists and the club desperate to get there because they were hosting the showpiece (and, er, Brondby) – the Red Devils scored 20 goals in six games but won twice, scraping through. Only group winners Bayern progressed automatically, with United also advancing as one of the two best runners-up.





Above Ole was the toast of Barcelona after his last-gasp toe-poke clinched the European Cup

"I DIDN'T MIND SOUNDING LIKE AN IDIOT, AS THERE WAS NO HAPPIER IDIOT ON THE PLANET"

Then, in injury time, having trailed 1-0 with two minutes left, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer won it – at home to Liverpool in the FA Cup fourth round, that is. "Tactics are important, but they don't win football matches – men win football matches," said Ferguson afterwards, hailing the character that kept the club's hopes alive on three fronts.

Tactically he could be astute, too: in the first leg against Inter in the Champions League quarters, he instructed full-backs Gary Neville and Denis Irwin to regularly occupy positions in front of the centre-backs, Stam and Ronny Johnsen, where Nerazzurri widemen Roberto Baggio and Youri Djorkaeff liked to drift and inflict maximum damage. In the return tie at San Siro, he played Johnsen in midfield to restrict the space for fit-again striker Ronaldo, who liked to drop deep to pick up the ball.

In the home leg of the semi-final against Juventus, after a rocky opening 45 minutes left them 1-0 down, Ferguson rescued a 1-1 draw by instructing David Beckham to stay narrow and form a midfield three, preventing Manchester United being outnumbered in the centre by Zidane, Didier Deschamps and Edgar Davids.

They went into the finale against Bayern unbeaten in 32 matches, a streak that had already seen them claim the league and the FA Cup. "In the past, I'd said the irony was that Ottmar Hitzfeld actually won the tactical battle in the final, because Bayern were in total control," says Barclay. "Ferguson said, 'No, he lost it when he took Lothar Matthaus off'. Some people felt Teddy Sheringham's equaliser was offside, but it wasn't. Matthaus had gone off, so nobody was telling the line to come forward.

"Until the 91st minute, Ferguson must have known the journalists' script was 'He's a great domestic manager, but he just can't hack it in Europe'. To win that Treble, he must have thought, 'Wow, I can die happy now'."

Ferguson's emotions were summed up by just three words. "Football, bloody hell," he said on TV seconds after the final whistle. "A flood of gibberish," was how he assessed that interview later. "I didn't mind sounding like an idiot, though, as there was no happier idiot on the planet."

"The crowning moment," is Edwards' verdict of events at the Camp Nou in '99. "It was the culmination of years of hard work."

COVERED IN TOMATO SAUCE

Even after the Treble, Ferguson wasn't about to relax. Throughout his managerial career,

FERGIE'S HONOURS LIST

13	3	5	4	4	1	2
PREMIER LEAGUE	SCOTTISH PREMIER DIVISION	FA CUP	SCOTTISH CUP	LEAGUE CUP	SCOTTISH LEAGUE CUP	CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

he was relentless. "You could get home from a Champions League game at 4am, you'd be getting in bed, then at 6am the phone would go," the club's former kit man Albert Morgan tells *FFT*. "He'd be bright as a button. 'Hiya, how are you doing?' He'd say, 'Do us a favour, Albert, can you pick me up and take me into the training ground? I've got to go to London today and am leaving my car here'. I'd say, 'Alright, I'll come round at around 9am. He'd say, 'No, now'.

"I'd take him to the station after training and he'd say, 'What are you going to do now?' I'd say, 'I'm going home'. 'Oh, you're doing half days, are you?' He had a wicked sense of humour. Still has, the bastard!"

The two have remained really close – such was their bond that the manager sometimes had a go at Morgan in front of the squad, as a message to the players. "The first time he did it, I thought, 'What the f**king hell have I done?'" laughs Morgan. "He was ranting and raving, the veins on the side of his neck sticking out. Then he walked towards me to leave the room, and winked at me. Another time, we were playing Juventus, Ryan Giggs was having a decent game, but one or two weren't. He knew those lads would crumble if he had a go at them, so he picked on Ryan because he was a tough lad. It woke all of the others up."

Manchester United won the league in each of the two campaigns after the Treble. After that third triumph, at the age of 59, Ferguson announced his intention to retire at the end of the following season. So firm was his plan that the club lined up a replacement. Arsene Wenger was sounded out but turned them down, Louis van Gaal was even approached by Ferguson himself, while Fabio Capello also held discussions.

Above Winning the Treble was "the culmination of years of hard work," reflected Martin Edwards

Edwards reveals that the final choice was Sven-Goran Eriksson – the Swede was only a year into his tenure with England, but had already famously triumphed 5-1 in Germany. "Peter Kenyon was chief executive, he was very keen to get Sven and persuaded the plc board," says the former chairman. "I think he'd agreed terms, then Alex changed his mind and we were pleased to accept that, so we went back on the deal we had with Sven."

Ferguson had actually been approached to take the England job before Eriksson, as he'd also been before Kevin Keegan was appointed in 1999. "It took me about 10 seconds to say 'No way'," the Scot later revealed. "I couldn't manage England in a million years."

His February decision not to retire brought relief. "His wife had said to him, 'You're not retiring, you're too young and I don't want you around the bloody house all day'," says Morgan. "He also knew about Eriksson, so he had to decide – it couldn't have gone on any longer before his successor was announced.

"He walked into the boot room, shut the door and said, 'I've got something to tell you – I've changed my mind, I'm not retiring'. Instantly, my daft humour came in – I said, 'F**king hell, I'm gutted!' Then he went into the dressing room, and the next minute there was an almighty cheer. That was a magical moment and I still get quite emotional about it now. It felt as though this whoosh of fresh air ran through the place."

A year later, Ferguson won his eighth title, his passion still as fierce as ever – illustrated by the moment he kicked a boot into David Beckham's face after an FA Cup defeat to Arsenal, months before the winger's exit. It had been an accident. "David answered him back – he shot over, and in the middle of the floor there were all these clothes," recounts Morgan. "He put his foot through the clothes, and underneath the clothes was this boot. It just nicked David on the eyebrow. It didn't even need a stitch, that was the bit that was blown up, because the next day he came in with this f**king big plaster. It was a circus. That was the end really. When it happened, the boss went into his office and I felt sorry for him. He wasn't angry, he was just upset, genuinely upset."

A year later, another home game against Arsenal led to another incident – Manchester United won, Ferguson quarrelled with Arsene Wenger in the tunnel post-match, then Cesc Fabregas lobbed a pizza. "It was launched up ▸

2	2	1	1	10	1	1
EUROPEAN CUP WINNERS' CUP	SUPER CUP	CLUB WORLD CUP	INTERCONTINENTAL CUP	COMMUNITY SHIELD	SCOTTISH FIRST DIVISION	DRYBROUGH CUP



Above Signing off with a 13th Premier League in 2012-13

the corridor going into our dressing room, and it happened to hit the boss," says Morgan. "It cost me a shirt, as I've still not got the bloody thing back! He couldn't talk to the press with a white shirt on, covered in tomato sauce. My top was there, so I said, 'Here you are, go and put this on'."

Such kind gestures didn't spare him from the manager's ire when the team headed to South Africa for pre-season. "We received an invitation to Nelson Mandela's house," says Morgan. "He had a little auditorium and we were all in our club suits, looking very smart. David Gill, Bobby Charlton and the boss were stood at the front, presenting Mandela with an Opus book, a big history of our club. You could hear a pin drop, then a phone went off, and it was in my pocket. The look I got off the boss was unbelievable, he wasn't happy.

"When we went outside, I ran and hid on the bus. All the lads were pissing themselves laughing. I sat on the floor between the seats – the boss got on, saying, 'Where the f**king hell is he?' The lads pointed to me, then he started kicking me – he wasn't doing it hard because he saw the funny side of it as well, but he was shouting, 'You f**king bastard!' It was so funny."

"THIS IS OUR PERCH NOW"

Arsenal's Invincibles season, followed by Jose Mourinho linking up with Roman Abramovich at Chelsea, meant Ferguson went three years without winning the league, before Cristiano Ronaldo began bagging goals regularly and they sealed three in a row for a second time, between 2007 and 2009.

"The manager had lots of conversations with Cristiano, and made him aware that the individual can only shine through a team effort – he needed to be as much of a team player as anybody else," Rene Meulensteen, the club's first-team coach at the time, tells *FFT*. "He liked to do stepovers, but if it doesn't lead to anything, it doesn't have a purpose. The manager asked me to keep emphasising to him that he had to be effective."

Ferguson's backroom staff changed several times in his 27 years at the club – assistants Brian Kidd, Steve McClaren and Carlos Queiroz all departed to become managers in their own right, but the instructions were clear to any new appointment. "He got me into his office and said, 'I just want to have a quick chat, I want to make sure we're on the same hymn sheet'," says Meulensteen.

"He had a flip chart and outlined it on three pieces of paper. He said, 'The most important thing is defensive organisation. We need to press very high and aggressively – sometimes we press more from a mid-block, on an area or on certain players; other times, when we have to protect our goal, it's about stopping crosses, but making sure when we regain the ball, we look to counter'.

"He then went into another flip chart about possession, saying, 'Possession is important to me, I want to dominate possession and play with authority. It gives you the initiative, so you keep moving your opponents. If you're winning, you can dominate a game through possession as well'.

"He said, 'There are a few rules within that possession that I want you to instill. One is rhythm – build-up rhythm is slower, attacking rhythm is much quicker, towards one-touch football and movement'. The golden rule was he hated to play backwards – he said, 'Think forward, look forward, play forward'. If there was no pressure on the ball, he wanted more movement, coming into pockets or in behind.

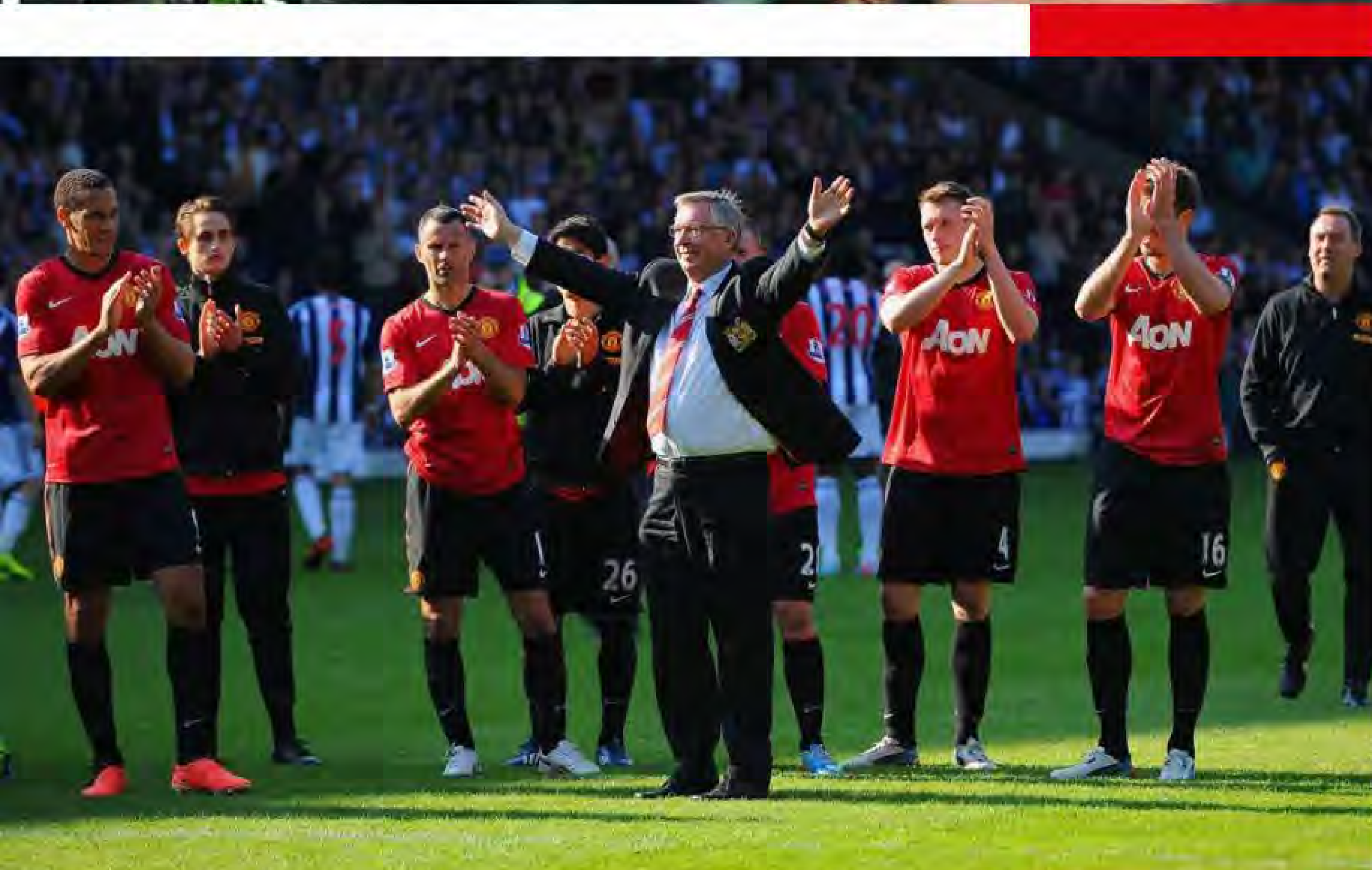
"Then he said, 'The most important phase: I want to see them attack with pace, power, penetration and unpredictability. No matter what you do – a passing drill, a shooting drill, a possession game, small-sided games – I want to see all those things'. That was my

SO FAR, AND YET SO FAR

Since Fergie left, United have been at least 12 points off the pace

Season	Finished	Pts from top
2013-14	7th	22
2014-15	4th	17
2015-16	5th	15
2016-17	6th	24
2017-18	2nd	19
2018-19	6th	32
2019-20	3rd	33
2020-21	2nd	12
2021-22	6th	35
2022-23	3rd	14





Above "Nobody panic. Everything will be perfectly fine without me"

blueprint for the sessions I did. The direction was very clear, but he never told me to do anything. He was always out there at training, but he never got that much involved. After that conversation, I planned the sessions."

Ferguson's methodology brought a second Champions League success in 2008. Three years later, his 12th league triumph for the club saw United usurp Liverpool's record of 18. "He wanted to knock Liverpool off their perch, and that was a huge statement with how many titles you needed to win to do it," beams Meulensteen. "But he f**king did it."

"HE WANTED TO KNOCK LIVERPOOL OFF THEIR PERCH, A BIG STATEMENT WITH THE NUMBER OF TITLES NEEDED. BUT HE F**KING DID IT"

In 2012, another neighbour deposed them – Manchester City deploying their own version of Fergie Time, scoring twice late on to deny Manchester United on the final day. "He was very calm," says Meulensteen of the dressing room afterwards. "He just said, 'Remember this moment and how you feel, because it will give us determination to fight back stronger'."

The next season, Manchester United won the title by 11 points. "He achieved that with probably his least impressive team," admits Patrick Barclay, highlighting the achievement. Ronaldo had gone, but Ferguson still knew how to get the best out of players.

"He was a genius, like a psychologist," says Tom Cleverley, part of that squad. "I had an awful game at Chelsea, played left-midfield and suggested it wasn't my best position, and I got a hairdryer from him. I never did that again! He'd let you know when he wasn't happy, but he'd never say it publicly because that would have created pressure from fans.

"He'd keep the whole squad motivated by mapping out his squad for the next four or five matches. If he said you were playing in the FA Cup in game two and the Champions League in game five, he'd never go back on his word, you could trust him 100 per cent.

"I'll also never forget that you needed 10 appearances to get a medal – in the season beforehand, even though City won it in the end, I'd been injured and he put me on in the penultimate game to give me 10, just in case. He didn't have to do that – you'd run through a brick wall for someone who's prepared to do that for you."

FRUSTRATED FAN

Ferguson's 13th and final Premier League title was won with four games to spare. Two weeks later, news emerged that he'd decided to retire once the season was over. This time, he wouldn't be changing his mind. "When he told me, we both shed a tear," says Morgan, who retired at the same time. "I sometimes wonder whether he'd have retired if we'd won the league the year before. I know for a fact he wanted to go out at the top."

Manchester United drew his final game 5-5 at West Brom, having led 5-2 with 10 minutes left. "If there'd been any significance on the game, he'd have been more angry!" laughs Cleverley. "But after the full-time whistle, the whole squad got in a big line, 30 yards from the away end, with him stood on the edge of the box, clapping his adoring supporters. I get shivers about that moment, even now. I'm proud to have started his last game. I can tell my kids and grandkids that I was part of it."

After 27 years of the same man being at the helm, Manchester United came seventh in the first season without him – replacement David Moyes was sacked after nine months. "We missed the routine and structure we had under Sir Alex," says Cleverley. "David was a great manager, but when something's run the same way for so many years and everyone is used to that, it was always going to be mightily difficult to replace him, as well as his coaching staff and the chief executive David Gill leaving at the same time. It was just too much change for the players to deal with. The club still hasn't recovered since the day Sir Alex left."

In the 10 full seasons since his retirement, Manchester United have always been at least 12 points from winning the league. "When Sir Alex was there, the Glazers took success for granted," continues Meulensteen. "They made a big miscalculation of how important he was in that success and the running of the football club."

Matt Busby's retirement lasted only 18 months before he stepped in as interim boss in 1970. Morgan insists Ferguson never came close to a similar return. "No way," he states. "Although every now and again, when we're sat having a cup of tea and we've had a s**t performance, he'll say, 'I'd f**king love half an hour in that dressing room'."

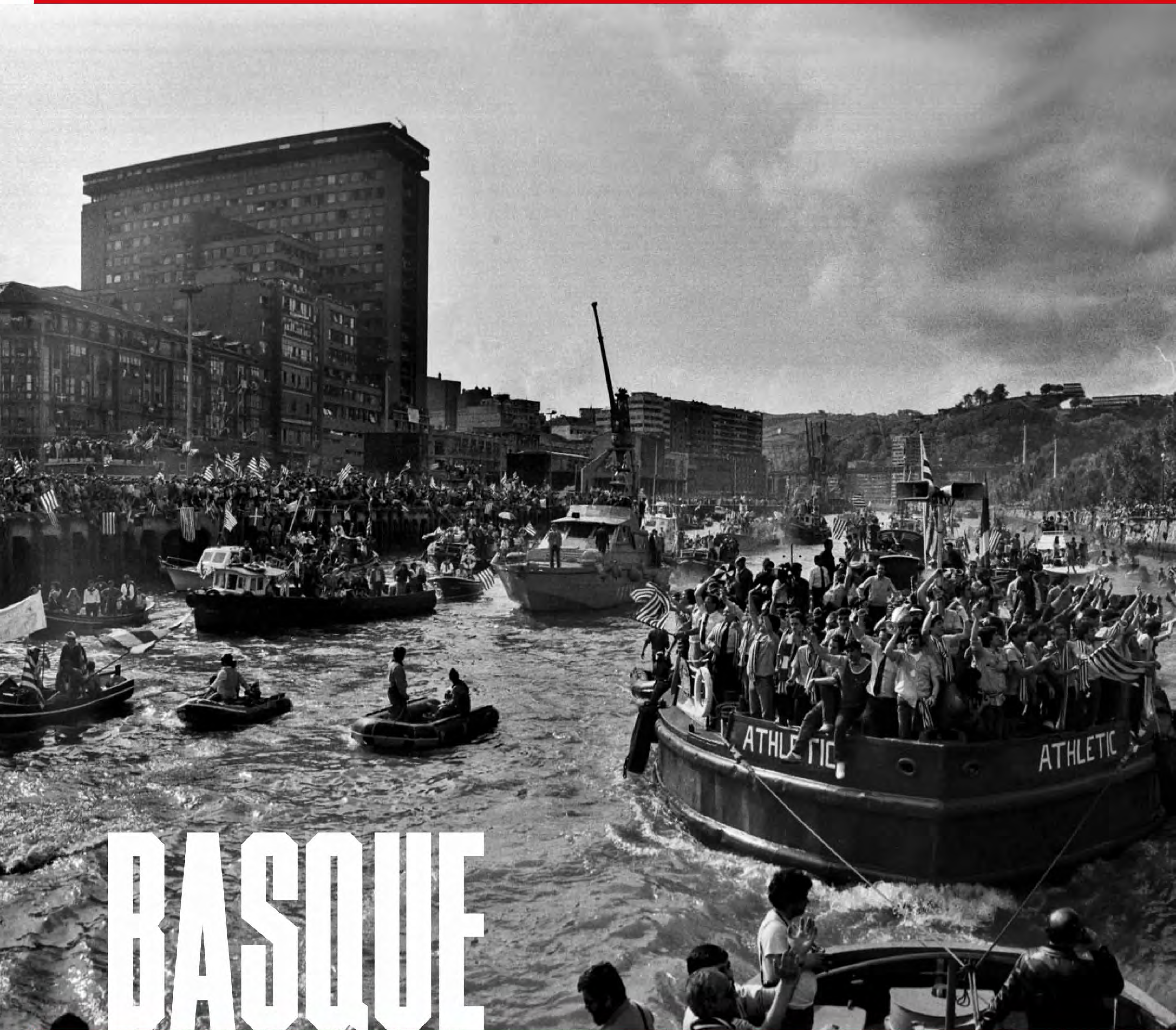
Ferguson has remained a frequent presence at Old Trafford. "The club still means a lot to him," insists Morgan. "If I don't go to a game and watch it on TV, I can guarantee within five minutes of kick-off, my phone is on fire – 'What the f**king hell was that? Look at that!' He's still so passionate."

He's always remained willing to give advice to other coaches, too. "You'd lose count of how many managers he's helped," says his former St Mirren and Aberdeen midfielder Billy Stark, who's now spent 27 years in the dugout himself, including caretaker stints with Celtic and Scotland. "He was someone you could pick up the phone to. He'd always call you back."

When Tom Cleverley became an under-18s coach at Watford last year, it was Ferguson who picked up the phone. "He gave me a call and offered advice," reveals the 34-year-old. "I felt privileged that he did that – he doesn't have to phone Tom Cleverley and wish him good luck in his Watford Under-18s job, but he does. That's the measure of the man."

A man who delivered an extraordinary 50 trophies during his time in management. Does that make him the greatest of all time? "For me, yes," declares Meulensteen. "He's the greatest manager the Premier League has ever seen."

It all began with a rendezvous in a service station car park on Bonfire Night 1986, after a deceptive phone call to Aberdeen Football Club. Manchester United owe a lot to Mike Edelson's fake Scottish accent.



BASQUE IN THE GLORY

Four decades ago, Athletic Club took the fight for Spanish supremacy to Real Madrid and Barcelona. Showing spirit and skill, the Bilbao boys won La Liga... and then defended it, too

Words Leo Moynihan



Above A trophy parade to top all trophy parades

Like so many love affairs, it started with a dance. Like rather fewer love affairs, it finished with a mass brawl.

From the spring of 1982, when the England national side visited Athletic Club in Bilbao and were welcomed by a traditional Basque jig called an *aurresku*, to the spring of '84, when the Copa del Rey final between Athletic and Barcelona ended in a punch-up that belonged in a western, the people of Bilbao were given a football team they still passionately adore today. This was a team its supporters could believe in, fanatically cheer and ultimately cherish forever; a team that would rise up and take on Spain's best.

It wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't always be pretty and occasionally it even turned violent, but take them on they bloody well did.

INSPIRED BY SIR BOBBY

On March 23, 1982, Ron Greenwood's Three Lions travelled to Bilbao. His side would soon be playing their opening World Cup games in the Spanish city, and Athletic's testimonial for long-serving winger Txetxu Rojo offered a useful recce. It was the first time England had faced an overseas club team, and having been accompanied onto the pitch by a brass band and that *aurresku* dance traditionally used to salute distinguished dignitaries, they played out a fascinating encounter.

England's presence in Bilbao's original San Mames Stadium was historically poignant. Formed back in 1898, the football club came with an anglophile lilt. Basque engineering students had returned from English shores excited about the thriving game, and urged on by an influx of British migrant miners and shipyard workers in the city – along with 50 shirts commandeered from Southampton in 1910 – the club, using its English spelling of Atletico, prospered.

Come the end of the 1981-82 campaign, with a new young Basque coach at the helm in Javier Clemente, Athletic were looking forwards, not backwards. The match against England garnered great interest among fans. Two-time Ballon d'Or winner Kevin Keegan was the main attraction and it was he who broke the deadlock in the first half. However, the hosts took the game to their guests after the interval and an equaliser from talented striker Manuel Sarabia earned them a draw.

In his press briefing afterwards, Greenwood opined, "We played better in the first half and deserved to score more, but Athletic have an ▸

excellent goalkeeper. The second period was more even and the home side impressed me. It was an enjoyable game." The shot-stopper who impressed Greenwood was a 20-year-old Andoni Zubizarreta.

The young man had made his debut under Clemente at the start of that season and, for him as with the team in general, the display that night against a formidable England side concentrated both mind and confidence. "That was an important and historic match," Zubizarreta tells *FourFourTwo*. "England has always been a reference in Bilbao and it was a match that generated a lot of excitement throughout the city."

For Clemente, the performance was also proof that the team and the attitude he was demanding were both strong enough to have them do more than just knock about the upper half of La Liga. Clemente had played for the club, but was forced to retire at just 24 after a bad leg break. In the summer of 1981, aged 31, he had accepted the coaching job, and his enthusiasm and total belief in himself and the team became infectious.

"He was young but he had travelled a lot to learn from famous managers, including Bobby Robson at Ipswich," says Zubizarreta. "He had a very dynamic idea of the game; of pressing and energetic football integrated with fitness and tactics."

Athletic finished a competitive fourth in Clemente's maiden campaign in charge. It was an improvement on their three previous seasons (ninth, seventh, ninth), but there was no sign to outsiders that they could launch a real challenge for the title.

Not that this is an underdog story. Athletic, along with Real Madrid and Barcelona, are to this day the only clubs never to have been relegated from the Spanish top tier. They had been historically successful, had wonderful facilities and a great youth setup. Conversely, contemporary knowledge suggested this was a team more than capable of winning one-off games against their rivals, but not to finish above them in the league.

One of those rivals just so happened to be their Basque neighbours. In 1981 and 1982, San Sebastian's Real Sociedad won back-to-back titles, the second thanks to a final-day victory at home to Athletic. For the players, it was an eye-opener. "It helped us to see that this option was possible," says Zubizarreta. "That match allowed us to experience their achievement live. It made us all realise that winning the league was a realistic prospect."

"WE HAD A STYLE – QUITE BRITISH"

For all of that provincial success, Real Madrid remained the team to beat. And in Catalonia, where Barcelona shared the Basque desire for regional autonomy and an end to the status quo, the ambitious methods at the Camp Nou were a universe away from San Mames.

Already housing German playmaker Bernd Schuster, Barcelona splashed a world-record £5 million to sign Diego Maradona from Boca Juniors. It was a statement signing, inviting presumptions of imminent glory. For Athletic, an institution that remained – and remains – loyal to its unwritten rule of recruiting only players native to its Basque region, any route to the top had become steeper.



Below Sublimely stubborn centre-back Goikoetxea

Yet they were cultivating a hotbed of local talent. Along with Zubizarreta in goal, gifted young players like midfielders Ismael Urtubi and Miguel de Andres impressed among seasoned, technical professionals. Up front they deployed Manu Sarabia and Dani: two deft forwards dripping in Athletic Club spirit. At centre-half, Bilbao-born Inigo Liceranzu partnered Andoni Goikoetxea, a defender of sublime stubbornness.

"For so many guys in the side, getting to represent Athletic was the dream as young footballers," Goikoetxea recalls to *FFT*. "In the '70s, the team had been competitive, but winning the league? Well, that was going to be extremely tough. But in our new, young coach, we suddenly had someone who truly believed in us."

With their coach's conviction came added combativeness. In the autumn of '81, during Clemente's first year in their dugout, Athletic visited the Camp Nou. Goikoetxea crashed into Schuster at knee level and the German tore his cruciate ligament, resulting in him missing the rest of the campaign as well as the forthcoming World Cup. Reputations and grudges were being formed.

Athletic's 1982-83 season started with an unprophetic 2-2 draw against fellow Basques, Osasuna, but the wins soon followed. Home or away, performances stayed solid.

"We hadn't won the league for 27 years, so there were no expectations from us fans," reflects Jose Angel Calvo, who was 13 at the time and attended every match that season. "We were competing, but we still felt inferior to Real Madrid."

In early December, second-placed Athletic hosted the top-of-the-table Merengues, and in keeping with the fans' inferiority complex,

HERE'S TO THE DREAMERS

Over 95 years, only five clubs other than Real Madrid (35), Barcelona (27), Atletico Madrid (11) and Athletic Club (8) have won La Liga



VALENCIA
1942, 1944, 1947, 1971, 2002, 2004

Los Che cemented their name in the Spanish game thanks to three Liga titles in the 1940s. They were champions again in 1970-71, managed by Alfredo Di Stefano (a playing legend); 30 years later, Rafael Benitez (not so much) won two titles.



REAL SOCIEDAD
1981, 1982

Managed by former player Alberto Ormaetxea, Sociedad became the smallest city to be crowned Spanish champions – courtesy of their superior head-to-head record against Real Madrid. To prove it wasn't a fluke, they saw off Barcelona by two points the next season.



DEPORTIVO LA CORUNA
2000

Deportivo won an historic title despite losing 11 Liga games; last term, their 69-point tally wouldn't have got a top-four place. But, galvanised by great home form and the goals of Roy Makaay, they achieved the impossible on the final day.



SEVILLA
1946

Founded by mainly Scottish expats in 1890, Andalusia's most successful football club lifted their sole Liga title in the 1940s. Their hero was Juan Arza, nicknamed *'El Nino de Oro'*, ('The Golden Boy'), who hit 14 goals as his side pipped Barcelona by a single point.



REAL BETIS
1935

Under Spain's Second Republic and prior to the Civil War, Betis dropped the royal patronage and were known just as Betis Balompie when they won their solitary Liga crown. Managed by Irishman Patrick O'Connell, they did it only three seasons after being in the second tier.

they lost 4-2. They had to go to Barcelona a week later, but despite the chastening defeat to Real Madrid, Clemente was able to make his players see the bigger picture. "He convinced us that Real and Barça competed differently," adds Zubizarreta. "He made us see that Barça's game was better for us and that the game we could win was the one at the Camp Nou."

It was the club's first visit since Goikoetxea's infamous tackle on Schuster, and the Barça faithful greeted him with expected ardour. The centre-half's every touch triggered deafening jeers. "It was wonderful," laughs Goikoetxea, with a glint still in his eye. "The more they booed me, the less pressure there was on my team-mates."

Four minutes after half-time, Goikoetxea himself stepped forward and nodded Athletic in front from a left-wing cross. "Silence," he remembers. "You couldn't hear anything. But then the boos got louder and louder." The 1-0 win cemented two things: Athletic were the likeliest challengers to Real Madrid for the title; and theirs was a team able to upset the footballing establishment.

The more they won, the more Clemente's style was scrutinised. Talk of mere destroyers materialised in the sports newspapers. "It was unfair," Goikoetxea tells *FFT*. "The press became very anti-us. We had a style – quite British. Not all good football has to be pretty passes. We played fast football, got the ball forward as quickly as possible and attacked. We had beautiful players."



Above "Wake up lads, there's still another half yet" **Below** Semi-final shootout success at Real Madrid en route to winning the double in '84

Zubizarreta agrees with his old team-mate. "[Clemente] wanted a dynamic, flexible and intense team. We played a very high tempo, with physical intensity. The collective was always the main thing, but we had individual talent that was able to express itself too. The coach also had an excellent eye for strategy when it came to corners and free-kicks – we were a powerful team."

That power continued to flow, and so did the goals. No other team even came close to equalling the Basques' scoring rate of two goals per game – a fact often ignored by the naysayers. But questions remained over the side's consistency, which was Real Madrid's big weapon. In late March, Athletic somehow squeezed a 5-1 defeat at Real Betis between 4-0 trouncings of Salamanca and Celta Vigo. A week later, they travelled to the Bernabeu, lost 2-0 and surrendered top spot to Madrid.

UNITED IN BELIEF

Once again, defeat to Real was followed by the challenge of Barça, this time at a manic San Mames. Athletic were brilliant. Matching the intensity from the terraces, they scored in the first minute and took a 3-0 lead, only for a Maradona-inspired Barcelona to notch two late goals. Backs were pinned to the wall. Athletic held on.

"Days like this were what made the team special," says Goikoetxea. "In hard moments, we could look at each other with belief. To all be from the same region, to all be Basque, to have those shared experiences, we knew we could trust each other, and on that occasion we won the game." ▸



"GOIKOETXEA NEVER DESERVED THE LABEL OF A 'BUTCHER'. HE WAS VERY SKILFUL"

That understanding was also evident in the stadium itself. San Mames was known as 'The Cathedral' – a divine, tight arena in the centre of the city. "I've been to some English stadiums, such as Highbury, and it was like that," says George Viar, an Athletic fan who was 12 in 1983. "It was unique in Spain."

Matchday brought the whole city together. "We would go there as a group of friends," says Calvo. "The stadium was surrounded by apartments. The bars were always full and loud. Whatever the weather, we would stand, with no roof to cover us, and I think the atmosphere we made helped the team."

To add to that passionate environment, the club first played its now-beloved anthem before a game in March 1983. A triumphant, operatic call to arms, the lyrics celebrate both the team and the Basque flag's red, white and green colours:

Red and white youth.
On the green pitch.
Pride of The Basque Country!

Local fervour and unflinching pride for the region had pushed the team so close to glory, but as the season's climax approached, the ultimate prize was seemingly, desperately, out of reach. On the final weekend, Athletic travelled to Majorca to take on Las Palmas while Real Madrid, requiring only a draw to secure the title, visited second-from-bottom Valencia. Each opponent needed a result to avoid the drop, but for those passionate fans in Bilbao, hope wasn't in abundance.

"How could we win it?" queries Calvo. "We weren't even disappointed – it was a superb season. 'Maybe next year?' we said. My family and four others all gathered around a small radio to listen."

In the third minute, Las Palmas scored. But then so did Valencia, and though strikes from Sarabia and Dani sent Athletic into half-time leading, Real Madrid still needed their goal. Athletic's players talked of just doing their job, but as the second period evolved – with Athletic notching another three goals and Valencia holding on – those families around their radio bunched closer and closer to it.

The minutes went by as they awaited that fateful, inexorable Real Madrid goal. Chances came and went. Madrid hit the crossbar, then hit it again. But the goal never came. Athletic Club were champions of Spain for a seventh time. "Oh, it was disbelief," recounts Calvo, beaming. "There was screaming, there was shouting – I can hear them now!"





Top Diego takes one for the team **Above** Euphoric scenes in Madrid as Athletic clinch the Copa del Rey

A decade had passed without winning any silverware and for one club director, Cecilio Gerrikabeitia, a function at City Hall wouldn't do. For a city built along the Ria de Bilbao, it was decided to use a river barge – La Gabarra – to show off the trophy.

Schoolchildren were let out and more than a million people lined the riverbanks for a day that those present continue to discuss with a devotion that defies time. "It's very difficult to describe, even for us players who were on La Gabarra," reflects Zubizarreta. "All those people, of all social classes and ages, from all the nearby towns, the river and the roads packed... those were hard economic, social and political times in the Basque Country, but they were days full of light and joy."

"IS THERE A BALL ON THE PITCH?"

During that summer of 1983, light and joy were replaced by catastrophic floods that besieged the city and the area, but amid the destruction, Clemente's team continued to shine brightly. Yet controversy and claims of destroying the game were amplified in late September when Goikoetxea scythed down Maradona, breaking the maestro's ankle and sidelining him for three months.

"It was very hard to time a tackle against Maradona," Goikoetxea tells *FFT*. "I didn't mean to hurt him. But, just moments before, Schuster had made a terrible tackle on me near the touchline – he was out for revenge for two years earlier – and the referee did nothing. Feeling frustrated, my next tackle on Diego was a forceful one. It was regrettable."

The press had their villain. Athletic's rivals had their soundbites. Barça were now being

managed by Argentine World Cup-winning boss Cesar Luis Menotti, who quickly labelled Athletic as "anti-footballers", even calling for Clemente to be given a lifetime ban. "That's what Barcelona always do," says Goikoetxea. "As soon as a team tries to take them on and is successful, they mention 'anti-football'. Nothing ever changes."

That Camp Nou clash ended in a 4-0 defeat for Athletic, but they now had a resolve that such setbacks wouldn't dent team spirit, and were very much in the title picture when they faced Liverpool in the European Cup second round in the autumn of 1983. In the Anfield first leg, they earned a goalless draw with Goikoetxea imperious against Ian Rush and Kenny Dalglish.

The second leg was just as tight. Liverpool matched Athletic's pragmatism; Sammy Lee was heard to ask if there was even a ball on the pitch. A 66th-minute header from Rush clinched the tie. "Bilbao had a reputation as a rough team," Reds captain Graeme Souness later wrote. "They were good losers against us, though – especially the fans, who clapped us onto our bus and passed round their [wine-filled] leather drinking pouches."

Meanwhile, the English press were dubbing Goikoetxea 'The Butcher of Bilbao'. Amid the general character assassination, he shone in a title race that was once again going to the wire. "Everyone loved Goikoetxea," declares Calvo. "He never deserved that label. He was a skilful defender, very good on the ball, and I remember a goal he scored when we beat Real Madrid near the end of that campaign. He ran and leapt and rose above everyone to head the ball in. It was so elegant."



Four games remained after that 2-1 victory, and Athletic had won two of them prior to their final-day decider against Real Sociedad at San Mames. With both Real Madrid and Barcelona in touch, they needed a win to seal back-to-back crowns. Athletic took the lead through Liceranzu, but Sociedad showed no neighbourly love, equalising in the second half. No matter – Athletic's set-piece aptitude bore fruit when Liceranzu headed the winner with 11 minutes left. Champions again, this time in front of 40,000 of their own people.

And more was to come, with the Copa del Rey final against Barcelona in Madrid. It was a tie played in a zealous anti-establishment atmosphere, but between two teams who had no time for each other. And so, Endika Guarrotxena's winner for Athletic wasn't the end of it. On the whistle, things turned ugly.

Above Clemente had his critics but delivered success **Below** Fans of all ages went out to greet La Gabarra

"We're prepared to respond to determined violence with the same violence," Menotti had worryingly announced before the final. Clearly. Now seething with frustration and having seen what he felt was a provocative hand gesture from unused substitute Miguel Angel Sola, Maradona directed a knee into Sola's face, followed by an elbow, knocking him out. Chaos ensued – a bar-room brawl that ultimately brought an end to Maradona's time in Spain and dented Athletic's double-winning celebrations.

"It's an ending that hurts all of us who were there," sighs Zubizarreta. "It has nothing to do with the spirit of the team, but with the circumstances of the game. What we prefer to remember is the two years and the club's capacity to spread joy and pride of belonging. I think everyone in Bilbao knows where they were and what they were doing when the decisive matches were played, or when we were received back in Bilbao. Everyone has an anecdote, a memory, a photo or a flag from those days. Yes, they were very happy times."

One of Jose Angel Calvo's memories was leaving the ground after that title-clinching win over Real Sociedad and his dad turning to him: "He looked at me and said, 'Enjoy this night, because it isn't going to happen again'." For the supporter, it seems dads are always right. In 40 years since, the club have gone on to win a pair of Supercopas, but that title, so dominated by the riches of their old rivals, remains elusive.

One dad hasn't given up the fight, though. "My daughter was born when we won the first of our two titles," says Goikoetxea. "She has never seen us enjoy this kind of success. I want her and others to see it again."

Athletic Club can hope. After all, they have already proved that dreams can come true.

"I ASKED GEORGE GRAHAM WHY HE HADN'T SACKED ME. THE DAY I WAS NO LONGER ANY GOOD, I'D HAVE BEEN OUT"

Drink, drug and gambling addictions threatened Paul Merson's Arsenal career, but his bravura talent kept him at Highbury. The Gunners great recalls his turbulent life, that night at Anfield and why a former gaffer could never f**k off a Rolls-Royce...

Words Mark White




JVC
HI-TEC

Back in the 1980s, Arsenal's stadium was immune from the tides of architectural revolution, its East Stand's Grade II-listed Art Deco exterior a monument to enduring permanence. Highbury's footballing residents weren't so lucky.

Paul Merson remembers distinctly the day George Graham first swaggered into the club. Barcelona's Terry Venables had turned them down. So had Alex Ferguson of Aberdeen, but third-choice Graham was, just like his compatriot, a no-nonsense headmaster keen to strike the fear of god into all of his pupils. Highbury's hallowed marble halls, underscored by gold and mahogany, were welcoming a demolition man. No one was safe.

"We had good kids, good youngsters – but George Graham took a gamble," reminisces Merson. "He came in from Millwall, got rid of top-drawer players Charlie Nicholas, Tony Woodcock, Graham Rix, Viv Anderson and Kenny Sansom. Then he signed Lee Dixon, Steve Bould from Stoke, Colchester's Perry Groves and Wimbledon's Nigel Winterburn."

Merson is going back some 37 years here, to 1986. Now 55, the bespectacled Gunners legend is sat chatting to *FFT* in his garden, with just the rumble of distant traffic and occasional Heathrow departure overhead for company. Yet when he reflects on his first meeting with Graham, conflating the Scot's arrival with his own fledgling career, he's 18 again and buzzes with excitement.

"IN THE END I THOUGHT, 'SOONER OR LATER, I'LL TAKE MY LIFE'. I DIDN'T WANT TO DO THAT"

"Looking back now, he wanted youngsters around who were going to listen to him," says Merson. "He ruled with an iron rod. Everyone was petrified of him – he wanted people that were going to be scared, and the old guard weren't going to be."

The vindication in Graham's methods was quite literally cinematic. The *Fever Pitch* 1988-89 campaign culminated in Arsenal, who began the season as 16/1 title outsiders, overhauling Liverpool at Anfield in the dying embers of an epic. It provided a platform for PFA Young Player of the Year winner Merson, second only to Alan Smith as the Gunners' top scorer, to take on the world and all that it had to offer. However, he knew what would happen if he ever got too comfortable. He'd seen it first hand when Graham arrived.

"I got suspended by the club twice, done for drink, drugs and gambling," he admits. "I did ask George one day, 'How come you haven't thrown me out?' I was constantly getting in trouble but these were his words, not mine. He said, 'If you have a Rolls-Royce, you get it fixed; if you have a Morris Minor, you f**k it off'.

"He said it in a nice way, but I knew: the day that I was no longer any good, I'd be out."

FOOTBALL'S JFK MOMENT

If you finished above Liverpool in the 1980s, you won the league. That's what the Arsenal squad believed at least, according to Merson, who compares that Merseyside dynasty to Tiger Woods' future golfing dominance.

"Coming second to Liverpool would have been phenomenal," he suggests now of the 1989 season's denouement. "To win it? It's one of the biggest miracles in football."

Michael Thomas' last-gasp Anfield winner remains the moment that fans discuss with Merson more than any other. He'll never tire of such conversations, more than 30 years after that most dramatic finale to any top-flight season before or since. Sorry, Sergio.

"It'll never happen again – never again," he says. "Aguero was nothing close. Manchester City were playing QPR, who'd just found out

Clockwise from below Arsenal's 1988-89 Anfield miracle workers; League Cup joy in 1992-93; not all heroes wear capes; Merson believes '90-91's title win was the Gunners' finest









they'd stayed up. This was a Friday night, the two top teams, the season had finished and there were never live games on the telly: this one was live. It's a JFK moment in football: if you're old enough, you remember where you were. The amount of Everton fans who have come up to me and said, 'Oh my god, what a night'. It doesn't matter who you support."

That evening, the young Merson became a man. An inexperienced team crystallised and a winning mentality was born. It was, as lifelong Gunner Nick Hornby recalled in his *Fever Pitch* memoir and future movie, as if "a light had suddenly shone down on all of us". Anfield's crescendo ended an 18-year wait for a league title: Merson was champion again just two years later.

"The 1990-91 team was one of the most underrated at Arsenal ever," he insists. "That team really goes under the radar – 1989 was great for the way we won it, it was a great team. But when you talk about the Invincibles or the Double winners at Arsenal, 1991 is up there, it was a phenomenal team.

"We only let in 18 goals and lost one game in a whole season, against Chelsea. In those days, you'd score a goal, run back towards the halfway line and you'd see that the other team were beaten. It was a weird feeling – it was like, 'Well, that's the end of this game'. We weren't going to concede and we could score goals, too."

Does he ever wonder what could have been, had they just found a way to draw against Chelsea that day in February 1991? Instead, Graham Stuart and Kerry Dixon scored in the second half to give the hosts a 2-1 success. Alan Smith's reply proved too little, too late.

Merson umms and ahhs. "It wasn't the last game of the season, so we might have lost another game after that, but it does feel a bit like being stuck on 99 goals: it's not good, is it?" he explains, referring to his own near-century of Arsenal goals in all competitions. "If we'd gone unbeaten in 1990-91, it would have been the best ever – better than 2004's Invincibles – because everyone was near the same level in the league. You never knew who was going to come bottom of the table. Nowadays, you usually know who's finishing round about where."

One person who can claim to have been unbeaten that season was Tony Adams. The centre-back's release from prison for drink-driving was still a fortnight away as the north Londoners fell to defeat at Stamford Bridge, but the skipper would return and ultimately lift the league title.

By the 1990s, the notorious Tuesday Club was in full swing. Players had Wednesdays off, so took advantage by decamping to the pub once training was done the day before. *FFT* wonders if Adams ending up behind bars was any kind of wake-up call for Merson, who was himself struggling with alcohol addiction around that period.

"No," he responds. There's a long pause as he searches for the right words. "I was in my addictions, it was the norm. When you're so mixed up in your own life, it's only when you come away from that, that you understand just how unbelievable your own situation is."

How did George Graham feel about the drinking? "Despite how hard George was, he liked the lads getting together and having a drink," says Merson.

"We used to go to Marbella three times a year. We'd leave on a Sunday, come back on a Thursday: as long as we worked hard, we'd have that camaraderie."

Eventually, Merson came out to tell the world he'd been suffering with addiction. In a tearful press conference in November 1994, the clearly distressed England international revealed his struggles. At a time when the public discussion of mental health problems was still very much in its infancy, Merson's bravery is even more affecting nearly three decades on. Merson felt he had no choice.

"The way my life was going, I couldn't hide from it," he says. "Drinking, gambling, taking drugs... and I was playing for England, and one of the best clubs – one of the best teams in Europe and we were winning big trophies. I needed to come out."

Suicidal thoughts were beginning to swirl around his mind, too.

"I was driving to work and wanting to kill myself every single day," confesses Merson. He speaks about such a harrowing time in his life calmly, with impressive candour and no clear discomfort in his voice. "Everything at my feet and I'm thinking about doing that? 'You selfish so-and-so,' that was what was going through my head each day.

"I thought if I told somebody, they might say, 'You're absolutely mad, we'll put you away'. But in the end, I just thought, 'I've had enough of this – sooner or later, I'll take my life'. And I didn't want to do that."

During the press conference, Merson broke down when he was reminded that he could never drink again. For an addict, living day to day is the norm – the idea of forever felt very daunting. "I'm still not sure I should have done that," he says of that meeting with the media. "I thought I could be one of those people who comes out and that helps other people. But I *did* have to go and tell the club that I'd been struggling."

"PUT THOSE TEABAGS AWAY"

Arsene Wenger didn't approve of the same kind of 'camaraderie' that George Graham embraced – the Frenchman didn't want his players consuming so much as a cup of tea. Ian Wright once snuck teabags into his hotel room: he chickened out of adding hot water when Dennis Bergkamp guilt-tripped him into drinking water. It was the new culture.

Merson was nearly two years sober by the time Wenger rocked up at Highbury from the J.League, with new ideas of how to conquer the Premier League.

"I loved him – training was mind-blowing," remembers Merson. "With George, for all of how great he was, I could tell you exactly what I was going to be doing on a Thursday in November the next year." He gazes into the distance and squints, as if reading a calendar.

"But it worked a treat! Arsene came in and everything was about thinking. You'd never just go out and play: if you took two touches, ▸

your second touch had to be moving the ball forward. He told the others, 'You cut out the drink and you can play until you're 35 years of age'. They cut out the drinking. They played until they were 35 years of age."

Naturally, a player as creative as Merson relished working under the attack-minded Wenger. "I played every game under him, bar when I had a hernia," he reflects, having previously played for almost a decade under the more conservative Graham. "George got us closing down, working as a unit. No one moaned in training about how boring it was every day – we won trophies and I couldn't speak highly enough of him. Arsene was 10 years ahead of his time – that was proven later in the Premier League."

So why did he leave Highbury for recently relegated Middlesbrough in 1997, still aged only 29? He pauses for a moment. "Do you know what? For the first time in my life, greed with my addictions," he replies with unfiltered honesty. "My addictions back then were really flying. Arsenal offered me a four-year deal on £580,000 a year – and Boro offered me a million pounds a year. I couldn't quite get my head around it.

"No disrespect to Middlesbrough, because I loved it when I lived there, but at the time, Bryan Robson and the money to feed my addictions, that was a massive part of it all."

That second-tier squad was nevertheless packed with talent. Mark Schwarzer, Andy Townsend and Paul Gascoigne were the three mainstays, while Brazilian duo Emerson and Marco Branca also featured as Boro sealed promotion and reached the League Cup final. Briefly house-mates, Merson and Gascoigne became close pals and occasionally indulged in some nocturnal activities that could best be described as 'eccentric'.

A transfer that could have begun a descent into obscurity had little affect on Merson's international career. Picture the modern-day equivalent: Bukayo Saka or Aaron Ramsdale, for example, dropping from Arsenal to the Championship for a self-confessed payday sounds like the quickest way to cut ties with the England team. Merson not only went to the 1998 World Cup, he featured in France, too: coming on during the second half of the famous last 16 showdown with Argentina, later converting his penalty in the shootout.

"It's not been done since then and I'd be shocked if it happened again," he says of his second-tier status at that tournament. "But it wasn't hard, not in that team. I was really fortunate to go to a Championship club with the players that we had, and Glenn Hoddle liked me: if he hadn't, I wouldn't have gone to a World Cup. It doesn't matter if you're Kevin De Bruyne playing in the Championship, you need to have your manager's support. That's the way it works."

Merson's club-mate Gazza, who famously missed out on Hoddle's final squad, found that out to his cost.

That summer of 1998, with Merson keen to move further south, John Gregory's vibrant

Below Merson and Gazza made Middlesbrough magic for a year; "Yes! I'm closer to London now"





ONE GAME FROM IMMORTALITY

Merson, Arsenal & Co lost one league match en route to 1990-91 title glory – in English top-flight history, only two other sides have done the same...

CHELSEA

A year after the Gunners' 2003-04 invincible vintage, emulating Preston's unbeaten season in 1888-89, Chelsea lost just one game in 2004-05. In Jose Mourinho's maiden Stamford Bridge campaign, they romped to the title by 12 points, their solitary defeat a 1-0 October reverse at Manchester City when future Blue Nicolas Anelka fired home from the penalty spot (right).



LIVERPOOL

Only five teams have lost one game or fewer during an English top-flight campaign – one didn't even win the league. Again, that defeat was at City. Liverpool bagged 97 points to the Citizens' 98, a 2-1 January loss for the Reds at the Etihad their undoing. That night, John Stones' goal-line clearance (right) stopped Liverpool scoring by just 1.12 centimetres. Fine margins...









Clockwise from above In action at France 98 as a First Division player; Wenger: "10 years ahead of his time"; life as Walsall gaffer didn't go to plan

"MY ADDICTIONS TOOK OVER AT WALSALL – IF YOU'RE NOT WELL, THEN YOU HAVE NO CHANCE"

Aston Villa came calling. A decade on from Anfield and all that, he was again challenging at the Premier League summit.

The Villans spent much of the first half of that 1998-99 season top of the league, with a mercurial Merson supplying for fellow new signing Dion Dublin, Julian Joachim and Stan Collymore. They fell short, of course, with a formidable Manchester United scooping the Treble. In 1989, Merson's Arsenal had lost a 19-point advantage over Liverpool only to recover to still win the title, but 10 years on there would be no comeback.

"People don't understand what the last eight games are like," he says now. "If you haven't been there as a player, I don't think the public will get it. It's so, so hard. I never really thought we were certain to win the league until 1991. We were a very good side at Villa but other teams were getting much better then – the likes of Chelsea, Arsenal and Manchester United."

If you finished above Manchester United by the late '90s, you'd win the league.

"We had a great team at Aston Villa," says Merson. "The biggest regret was the FA Cup final in 2000. We went out to not lose the game and that's not a way to play football. The last final at the old Wembley: if you're going to get beat, get beat and don't go out with a whimper."

Chelsea beat Villa 1-0, thanks to a scrappy Roberto Di Matteo goal. Merson was gutted, but mostly for his team-mates. "I'd won everything in the game, more or less, bar the European Cup by then, and I was OK with it, I took it well. But I felt for some of the other players, because you don't get many chances. With the quality of sides around at that time, it was hard to win something."

"WHEREVER YOU GO, IT AIN'T ARSENAL"

Paul Merson played more than 600 league games in English football. He won the title twice for Arsenal before the advent of the Premier League. After leaving Highbury, he was in the PFA Team of the Year three times for campaigns below the top flight – with Middlesbrough in 1998, Portsmouth in 2003 and League One Walsall in 2005. You never really lose it, do you?

Despite his off-field tribulations, Merson achieved so much on the pitch. He remains a beloved club legend at Arsenal. He played 21 times for England, including at a World Cup, even though his peak coincided with the national side struggling as a whole. There must be few regrets?

"No, no, no," he declares, shaking his head. "My biggest regret is actually at Walsall, being the manager. I thought I'd be good at it. I always wanted to be a manager, I'm addicted to football."

Having joined the Saddlers the previous summer, Merson became the club's player-manager in April 2004, less than six weeks after he'd left an Arizona clinic to receive treatment for his gambling addiction. Walsall chairman Mike Lloyd said that Merson had been "an inspirational figure since he joined us as a player, and we lost our way while he was in America".

"It was an amazing opportunity and again, my addictions just ruined it," sighs Merson. "Absolutely ruined it. I really did think I had a chance to be a good manager, I know the game. My addictions took over and if you're not well, you have no chance."

One wonders what Merson's career would have looked like today, had it not been for those addictions. He always channelled such intensity and imagination into his football, reinventing himself throughout his career under new managers and in new situations – but while there were good times after his departure from north London, is there a part of him that wishes he'd never left Arsenal?

"Wherever you go from there, it ain't Arsenal, that's it," he tells *FFT*, explaining what it's like to walk out of those hallowed Highbury hallways as a home player for the very last time. "Football's a funny old game: you leave and always think that the grass is greener on the other side, but it's not. You've got to make the most of your opportunities when you can – it's such a short career and you can't catch a breath."

A fascinating and convivial host, Merson has spent more than an hour remembering certain aspects in minute detail . He can recall some things like they were yesterday – those captivating early years under Graham, as the jewel of a Gunners side challenging for a miracle of a league title, are never too difficult to recount.

"I can picture myself sitting in the dressing room at 21 and George saying, 'Your playing days will go this quickly'," continues Merson. He clicks his fingers. "George would say, 'So work hard'. I'd think, 'Oh, come on'. Then one day, I was the manager of Walsall, saying exactly the same thing to my players – and I could tell they were looking at me thinking the same thing that I was at 21: 'Oh shut up gaffer, I've got ages yet'.

"But you don't. You just don't. It goes by so fast. You come close to winning something one season, and that could be it for 10 years. That's football. Chances don't come often."

Off the field, Graham gave his Rolls-Royce more than one. Morris Minors were seldom afforded such overindulgence, but Merson's manifest genius deserved every chance it got.

Paul Merson was speaking to FourFourTwo in partnership with GambleAware, which offers support to anyone affected by gambling issues


adidas
OGS

"WE WON 3-0 AT SPURS. TWO GAMES LATER, I WAS SACKED"

Two-and-a-half years since his Manchester United reign came to an end, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer sits down with *FFT* for a rare interview, opening up on the club's post-Fergie struggles, Cristiano Ronaldo and the challenges of managing modern superstars

Words Andy Mitten

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has something to show us. He opens his phone. No, the code isn't 260599. Heading straight to his photos app, he asks us "2019?" and proceeds to scroll back through the pictures.

Most from recent years are of his family. Smiling faces of his three children in smiley places – hot and cold. He's at stadiums in Milan, Naples and Dortmund. There are pictures of mountains, water and ice in Norway. The former Manchester United player and manager learned to sail before he turned 50 last year, coaches his son's junior football team and, unlike the previous quarter of a century, lives a quiet life in his hometown of Kristiansund on Norway's stunning Atlantic coast.

"March 2019?" he asks, and he's not about to refer to his picture on the front cover of that month's *FourFourTwo*. He's swiped through years as a Manchester United manager, but there are almost no flashes of red shirts in the pictures. This was a man who managed and wasn't one for photos. He's the last person to be active on social media, but on March 6, 2019, he decided to get his phone out and film his players for the one and only time.

"Here," he says, as he presses play on a video. The images show the away dressing room inside the Parc des Princes in Paris. The sounds are his players singing 'Ole's at the wheel', to the Stone Roses' *Waterfall*: "Tell me how good does it feel? We've got Sanchez, Paul Pogba and Fred, Marcus Rashford is Manc born and bred." Eric Bailly is the most enthusiastic dancer, standing on a massage table giving it some and kicking pizza boxes. Eric Cantona and Sir Alex Ferguson have come down from the stands.

And why not? United have recovered from a home defeat against PSG in the last 16 first leg at Old Trafford, beating Thomas Tuchel's side 3-1 away with a 94th-minute Rashford penalty in front of 3,000 away followers in the Parisian rain. The end of that game remains the most exhilarating moment of the post-Ferguson years. It didn't lead to a trophy – Solskjaer's failure to win any silverware in nearly three years of management was a major reason he didn't keep his job – but that young, injury-hit United performance in pink won't be forgotten.

"One special night in Paris made me become the permanent United manager," he tells *FFT*. "We lost the first leg 2-0 at home. PSG are a difficult team, a very good team, but there was always something where I felt we could beat them in Paris. Maybe it was too much confidence on their part.

"I knew that everyone would be down if we lost the game – and we were expected to lose in Paris. We were on an amazing run of 10 wins and two draws in my first 12 league games, but weren't going to win the league, though we were still in the FA Cup.



"Paris looked impossible. The television commentator said it was mission impossible to score three times in Paris – I know that, because I've watched it and all my United games back. But I wanted to give my players belief. That's when I said: 'Mountains are there to be climbed.' Manchester United have always thrived in adversity, have never been a club that have given up.

"We worked hard for two weeks ahead of the game in Paris. We targeted a couple of their players – I don't think it's respectful of me to name them – but we thought they would make mistakes under pressure. We targeted their mentality, which I felt was confidence bordering on arrogance. We knew they would try and outplay us, but that would give us opportunities.

"I told them to enjoy the Champions League music, the best sound in football, and make sure it wasn't the last time they heard it that season. Romelu Lukaku scored twice in the first 30 minutes and we led 2-1."

Tell me how good does it feel?

"At half-time, I told the lads we just had to hang in there," Solskjaer continues. "We only needed another goal. We'd already surprised them by scoring two. I said that if we got to the last 10 minutes needing only a goal, then it was squeaky-bum time for them, they'd wobble. And we did. Marcus was shooting from distance against Gianluigi Buffon. That's what you want Marcus to do. Give the goalkeeper something to think about."

Then Manchester United got a disputed penalty. "Players who can handle that pressure are the best: Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and, after 94 minutes, Marcus with that penalty – a brilliant one, right in front of the away fans, to send us through to the quarter-finals.

"I ran across the pitch to celebrate with the players and the fans in the rain. Then we went back to the dressing room. It was electric. Which is where the video is from."

MANCHESTER TO MUMBAI

Five years on from that night in Paris, only one name from 'Ole's at the wheel' remains at Manchester United.

Following his nocturnal January escapades in Belfast, even Rashford has lost a good deal of his credit – in surveys among fans at the time, more than 80 per cent wanted him to leave, Manc born and bred or not. Solskjaer is speaking to *FFT* as we accompany the club's 1999 Champions League final hero on a trip to India and he knows he'll be asked about the player he calls 'Rashy' throughout the trip.

The Norwegian is visiting the country for the first time, having accepted an invitation to speak to supporters in Bangalore, Mumbai and the capital, New Delhi. His connection

Clockwise from above That night in ~~Barcelona~~ Paris; "Now we get to do the song in the dressing room"; Ole and Sir Alex have always been very close; fans in India love the ex-United gaffer



with the club's fanbase is still strong, but in between fans talking to him about '99 – "it happens every day when I'm not in Kristiansund," he says – there's a press conference held for him in Bangalore.

The media who attend aren't as interested in the past, more his views on Rashford, Belfast and the present. Solskjaer knows he must be careful – everything he says risks being twisted for clickbait and sensationalism. That's the Manchester United online world looking for hits, where exaggerated and fake news proliferates, profiting only its creators.

He is soon asked about Rashford and the forward's poor performances this season. His reply is measured. "Obviously I managed Marcus for three years and I know him," United's former boss explains. "It's not my job to go out and discuss his performances, but last season he was fantastic and it's about consistency in football. Marcus and many others haven't hit the heights this season. I'm sure he had a wake-up call recently [he was dropped after the Belfast controversy] and hopefully that will spur him on."

The journalist looks for an angle and asks if it's up to the manager to get the best from Rashford. If the Norwegian says yes, then 'Solskjaer slams Ten Hag' nonsense

"TV COMMENTATORS SAID PARIS WAS IMPOSSIBLE, BUT UNITED HAVE NEVER BEEN A CLUB THAT GIVE UP"

headlines await. But he knows that. "I'm not sure it's the manager's job to get the best out of Marcus Rashford," he replies. "Is it the manager's job to get the best out of him? Or is it mostly himself, or any player's responsibility to get the best out of yourself? That's more important. He's had a fantastic career, some ups and downs. Now we hope he's going to hit that consistency because I know, and we all know, there's a top player there. It's difficult to be at the top all the time, but it takes sacrifice."

Sensible Solskjaer. He's proud of his time as a Manchester United player, reserve boss and first-team manager. He talks now like a fan and has opinions like anyone – he's optimistic that Sir Jim Ratcliffe's arrival can be a positive, he's torn on whether it's better to redevelop Old Trafford or move to a new stadium. As a former manager who's spoken exceptionally rarely in public since his exit in November 2021, his words carry weight.

Turbulence has prevailed in the near-11 years since the departure of Ferguson, the boss who'd send Solskjaer, his neighbour of "two passes away", to pick up a copy of the *Racing Post*, or ask him to pop around and do trick or treat on Halloween with his grandkids.

"They were scared of me, and I'm still scared of Sir Alex now when I speak to him," Solskjaer laughs. "I don't want to let him down, but he's the kindest man. When I was playing, he'd sometimes ask me for a ride home after away games. If we'd lost, that was the worst 10 or 15 minutes. He'd be in a bad mood.

"But I had a great relationship with him, especially after I turned Tottenham down [in December 1998] to stay at United. He brought me into his office and said: 'Tottenham and Alan Sugar have put a bid in for £5.5 million, Martin Edwards has said yes and the club want the money, but I don't want you to go – if you stay here, you'll play and be an important part of the squad.' So we agreed for me to stay. Then he said, 'please don't tell anyone', as he'd just lost the club all that money. I finished that season scoring the last goal of it in Barcelona..."

Ferguson has been a major figure in his life. "I look up to him so much and learned much from him as a manager," Solskjaer says.

"He always stressed the importance of hard work in his team talks, yet at the same time he'd say: 'You don't know what hard work is – ask your parents or grandparents what hard work is.'

"He got us so grounded, even though we were the best team in the world. Nowadays, ▸







if you say something like that to a player, his parents or his agent would call you.

"So much has changed in the way you talk to players. Everyone has PR agents. If Sir Alex wanted to speak to me, he rang my phone and he spoke to me, or we spoke on the training ground.

"Now, we have to go through different agents and management. I find that really strange, because football is a game played by people, managed by people, and you need to be able to speak together, to connect, to get the best out of each other and trust each other."

A CRICKET CLUB BEGINNING

Solskjaer's ability to connect, his club status both as a legendary player and their former reserve manager, as well as an impressive start in club management at Molde, if not Cardiff, got him the caretaker job when Jose Mourinho departed. He was brought in to calm the chaos and make people smile again: players, staff, supporters. Mourinho admitted he deserved to be sacked, and the mood had been toxic.

"I'm stupid but also confident," says Solskjaer by way of explanation. "I had in my contract with Molde that if Man United asked me to be manager, I was allowed to go for free. Nobody thought that was going to happen so they signed it, but it did happen.

"I've always been a *Football Manager* guy, not a *FIFA* guy. Always played the manager games and not the playing ones as a kid."

Solskjaer had started out in management aged 13 with a Kristiansund street team he called 'Maranico', a portmanteau of Maradona, Platini and Zico. Despite his tender years, he'd cycle around the town getting the best players to play for him.

"Management was more my dream," he says. "I've always been fascinated by picking teams, buying players, selling players and my dream was to be Man United manager. Of course, you prefer to be a player because you're young and fit and can run around, plus you only have to concentrate on looking after yourself and being a good team-mate.

"When you're the manager, every single player, staff member and fan is your responsibility. It's a lot more stressful and takes its toll. It's 24/7, your phone is on and everyone can call you. Players have problems, staff have problems, the media is against you, yet to have that pressure is a privilege. It comes with being at the biggest club. But it's still the second best job after being a player."

Solskjaer became Manchester United's caretaker manager in December 2018. "I arrived and was asked to go straight to the staff Christmas party at Lancashire Cricket Club," he remembers. "I walked in halfway through the night. The place was packed. I was introduced. Everyone – and United have 1,000 staff – was singing. Smiling. And we'd not even played a game.

"We went to Cardiff, my old club, in my first game and scored five. It was just about letting the players play. Play forward, run forward, create chances, score and enjoy being a Man United player. We won our first eight games and had a great time together.

"Then suddenly the media – I understand why, because we were playing so well – were asking, 'Does he get the job permanently?'. I'd never thought about doing it permanently, I was just enjoying myself and the players were, too. I got the job and something changed. Tiredness, since we demanded a lot. That caused injuries. Some players wanted to leave. I felt that the air came out of the balloon at the end of that first season, but in my two full seasons we finished third and second in the Premier League."

There were some fine moments aside from Paris. "Scott McTominay's goal in the 96th minute against City in the last league game before lockdown," he says. "Scott's a great player and lad. He always gives 100 per cent for the club and represents United in the best possible way. It was wonderful for everyone.

"There was the 9-0 against Southampton. We played some nice attacking football. At our best, we'd go to places like Brighton, Spurs and Everton under Carlo Ancelotti, and we'd control the game. Or Leeds against Marcelo Bielsa's side: we won 6-2 and 5-1 at home. Beating City away wasn't an issue. That was Man United, we had to dig in, yet run against very motivated teams. Most are against Man United.

"And I don't think we got the recognition for the organised attacks and defending, which we did well. Other managers and coaches complimented us on our tactical approach, with and without the ball."

Unai Emery was one of those who praised Solskjaer's tactical nous during games played in difficult COVID times. "In a strange





Above CR7 was the right buy at the wrong time **Left** It was a big thumbs up for Ole's first two full campaigns

"RONALDO DESERVES MORE CREDIT. HIS SECOND DEBUT WAS ONE OF OLD TRAFFORD'S MOST ELECTRIC DAYS EVER"

SAFE TRAVELS

Solskjaer's Red Devils set a new record for the longest run of games without an away defeat in the history of the Premier League

MANCHESTER UNITED 29

When Solskjaer's men lost 2-0 at Anfield in January 2020, their third loss in four on the road, you'd have got long odds on United's next away defeat coming in October 2021. COVID soon forced matches behind closed doors – 20 fixtures during their long unbeaten run were played without a crowd.

ARSENAL 27

The Gunners were the previous record holders after avoiding defeat on the road from March 2003 to October 2004, spanning their famous Invincibles season and beyond. The run came to an end with defeat in the feisty Battle of the Buffet at Old Trafford, sparked by the Cesc Fabregas-launched pizza post-match. Watch out, Fergie!

ARSENAL 23

Before Arsenal, the record was held by, er, Arsenal – between May 2001 and October 2002. Wayne Rooney, like in 2004, scored to end the unbeaten run – the 16-year-old netted a stunning first senior goal, at Goodison Park. Remember the name...

MANCHESTER CITY 22

The fourth-longest unbeaten away run in the Premier League had just begun when United's record sequence ended. After defeat at Spurs began 2021-22, City didn't lose again on their travels until October 2022, when Mo Salah consigned them to defeat at Anfield.

way, it helped our young team to not have crowds there, even though it was a strange atmosphere, because it was easier to coach them," says Solskjaer. "I had very good lads around me [on his staff]: Kieran McKenna and Michael Carrick were with me."

Manchester United came second in 2020-21 and, though they lost 11-10 on penalties to Emery's Villarreal in the Europa League final, the team looked to be on the up and capable of mounting a first serious title challenge since 2013. At that stage, they hadn't lost a single Premier League match away from home since January 2020.

"I KNEW THAT IT WAS OVER"

That summer, the club signed Raphael Varane and Jadon Sancho. Then Cristiano Ronaldo. Fans were buzzing. 'Viva Ronaldo' was back. "We never wanted him to go to City," Solskjaer says of Ronaldo. "We'd had four wins and a draw, and were top of the league in September 2021. Raphael Varane and Jadon Sancho joined, then we made that next step by signing Cristiano. It felt right. It didn't turn out right, but it was the sensible thing to do at the time. He was available and still top level.

"He made his second debut against Newcastle and that was one of the most electric days at Old Trafford ever – he scored two goals. He deserved that chance to come back. He got 24 goals in that first season. He deserves more credit than what he's got. He was still one of the best goalscorers in the world, he was looking strong for us."

Just two months after Ronaldo's return, though, Solskjaer was out of a job – having taken 13 points from their first five league games, Manchester United then lost five of the next seven. Among that nightmare spell, their long unbeaten away run came to an abrupt end, losing 4-2 at Leicester. A month later, a 4-1 loss at Watford signalled his exit.

"We'd started the season well," he sighs. "Bruno Fernandes missing a penalty against Villa was when things started to go against us. I knew when I looked at the fixtures it was going to be a deciding period. We'd play City and Liverpool, plus Leicester and Spurs away. After that there was Chelsea and Arsenal, plus Champions League games.

"We all needed to pull together in the same direction. Egos came out in a few players. We beat Tottenham convincingly 3-0 away, but then lost two games. I must be the only manager to be sacked two games after beating Spurs away 3-0. My final game was at Watford... I knew it was over then."

Home defeats to Liverpool and Manchester City by an aggregate score of 7-0 meant he didn't make it as far as the games against ▸



Chelsea and Arsenal. History remembers his spell as United boss better than at the time – the club are yet to match the second-placed finish he achieved in 2020-21.

"Looking back, the managers after Sir Alex haven't hit a consistent level," he says. "We did it for two years under me, third and second. There was progress. But in my final season we didn't. I enjoyed it, apart from the end. I tried to do my best every single day, and tried to make the staff be the best they could be. That's my management style.

"There was something missing from my time at United: a trophy. One penalty [in the Europa League final] could have changed that and my time would be viewed differently. Trophies are important for a club like Man United and I understand that, but it was also important to lay down the foundation of good performances and I did that.

"Bruno Fernandes made a big creative difference. I scouted him live and saw flashes of Juan Sebastian Veron in him. We wanted him, but before that I wanted to be solid at the back. That was my priority. We signed Harry Maguire and Aaron Wan-Bissaka. Harry was a top captain for us. He lifted the mood when he arrived and I remain an admirer. He's always first to the ball with headers."

Solskjaer had a lot of support from fans – and a lot of criticism online. Manchester United dominates. With no shortage of critics when the team lose, it helped that he found support from Gary Neville and Roy Keane, his former team-mates and also high-profile pundits on Sky Sports.

"My relationship with Roy has turned out really well," he says. The pair are in regular contact and message often. "When we played we used to have a few fights. He demanded 100 per cent every single day. He pushed the players and wanted to count on his team-mates all the time.

"The day Roy stopped moaning at you, you knew you were in trouble. It meant he'd given up on you. He never stopped shouting at me, so he saw something in me. When I saw him stop shouting at certain individuals, I used to think, 'You're finished, you're done'. And they usually were."

"SIR ALEX KNEW IF HE PUT ME ON THE BENCH THEN I'D BE ANGRY. A LOT OF SUBS ARE SULKY OR HOPELESS"

LOOKING UP TO ERIC

Solskjaer played with the biggest names, yet he was an unknown when arriving in England from Molde in 1996. "Sir Alex wanted Alan Shearer, and who could blame him?" he says of that summer, when Shearer instead went to Newcastle for a world-record £15m. "He was the best goalscorer. But many goals doesn't guarantee trophies. United signed a cheaper striker – and I hope the gaffer was happy with me."

Back then, Manchester United had just won a second Double in three seasons, and expectations were high. "I felt no pressure whatsoever," Solskjaer insists. "It felt like a privilege. I was six minutes into my debut when I scored. Eric Cantona was the first one to celebrate with me, David Beckham was the second. I looked around at the crowd going mad and I had all the players thanking me. That was a wow moment, the start of something special. I played with some of the best players in the world, but then we were one of the best teams in the world.

"We had a great dressing room. We challenged each other, we loved each other, we fought with each other in the dressing room because we needed to win. We had some fiery characters. David May was the joker, Paul Scholes was the silent assassin, sat there at the back throwing comments. Giggsy was the entertainer. Eric Cantona set the mood. When he came into the dressing room, everyone just sat down and looked at him. Everyone looked up to him.

Above Ole was popular with the United faithful as a player and later a manager **Right** "Benched again? You really do like me when I'm angry, boss"

A DEAL THAT BACKFIRED

Solskjaer before Ronaldo's arrival

P	W	D	L	GF	GA
100	53	28	19	182	107

Solskjaer after Ronaldo's arrival

P	W	D	L	GF	GA
9	3	1	5	13	19

League games only

"Eric and I – plus Jordi Cruyff – became friends. We had a party at the end of my first season. We went to a restaurant, partied hard and said goodbye with our wives and girlfriends. The next day, we went to London and heard on the radio that Eric Cantona had retired. We'd only said goodbye at 4am that day – that was what Eric was like. He was about to shock football and he didn't say a word to his mates the night before. It was sad for us all, but I enjoyed one year playing with one of the best team-mates ever."

Solskjaer didn't ever top the strikers' list at Old Trafford. "Andy Cole, Dwight Yorke, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Scholes. I was down the pecking order, but I saw so many strikers come and go. I just stuck up for myself, believed in myself, fought and proved that the manager should play me.

"Sir Alex knew that if he put me on the bench then I'd be angry, but also fired up and ready to give everything when I came on. Not every sub does that. A lot of subs are sulky and hopeless on the bench. I wasn't, and nor was Alan Smith. We went on with the aim of proving the manager wrong."

At the City Ground against Nottingham Forest on February 6, 1999 – the 41st anniversary of the Munich air disaster – something remarkable happened with substitute Solskjaer. "The game was wrapped up, yet Ole scored four goals without breaking sweat," team-mate David May later told *FFT*. "Only one of them was a tap-in, too. They were difficult chances to finish. I was sat there, thinking, 'f**k me, how does he do it?'. I was laughing at him in the dressing room afterwards. Laughing and shaking my head because he was a freak of nature. Ole just played it down."

Coach Jim Ryan had a simple instruction: "We're winning 4-1, please don't do anything stupid – keep the ball and see the game out."

"That's not the way I'm made," the Norwegian says now, describing his four goals, the first of which came in the 80th minute. Manchester United won 8-1. "If you're going forward, then you go for goal. If you score four, then why not five, six, seven, eight? Sometimes the ball just falls at your feet and you just must put it in the goal. A striker should be in the right position and remember, the goal never moves. I've still got the match ball at home."

Home, back in Norway, is where he's spent the last two-and a-bit years. It's where he's happy to stay, unless the right offer comes in.

"Yes and I've had offers," he says, from two European national teams in as many weeks. "And before that, two from Saudi Arabia. Top money, but I'm not about money. Jobs in England, too. My agent looks through them and we talk, but without sounding arrogant, if you've managed Man United, you put your own criteria about where you want to work.

"Maybe that's a different challenge where I need to experience a new culture and learn a new language – Spanish, Italian, French or German. I love England and the Premier League. Even the Championship feels very strong, but I'm not bound to England. The DNA and identity of the club is important to me, a club where I can be the best me. It must be a match. Maybe I made the wrong decision to go to Cardiff for example, where there was a clash of style and identity."

Right now, as he talks to *FFT*, he's in a good place. Worshipped by fans in India. Happy at home. Happy to go away – just like his Manchester United side, who went 21 months unbeaten on the road in the Premier League.

Knowing what fans have seen since, it wasn't quite so easy to achieve, was it?



PLAY UP POMPEY



Twenty-five years ago, Milan Mandaric landed in England after a spell at Nice, Jim Ratcliffe-style – via a love-hate alliance with Harry Redknapp, he paved the way for Portsmouth's glory days

Words Richard Edwards

A glass of red wine, a glass of white, a heated argument, a *Tiswas* star, a huge dry-cleaning bill and Yakubu. It's a sentence that *FourFourTwo* never thought we would write, but one that sums up the simultaneous fusion of madness and magic at Portsmouth in the 2000s.

At the heart of it was Serbian businessman Milan Mandaric, who became one of the first major foreign owners in English football in 1999, and who rescued a second-tier club in deep financial trouble and dire straits on and off the pitch.

Within a decade, Portsmouth were a top-half Premier League side, FA Cup winners for the first time since 1939 and giving AC Milan an almighty scare in Europe. From one Milan to another, it was a hell of a ride – and not without its dramas.

DINENAGE AND DORCHESTER

In late 2002, Harry Redknapp was midway through his first full season as Portsmouth manager when things erupted.

"There was a supporters' club event one night," recalls Neil Allen, chief sports writer at the *Portsmouth News*. "Harry was having a glass of red in the boardroom. He and Milan weren't very happy with each other, because Harry wanted another player.

"They had a few words and Harry's red wine ended up all over Milan. Milan's white wine went flying elsewhere. They both stormed out, swearing about one other. Harry huffed he'd had enough. Milan replied, 'Fine, just go'. Harry's assistant, Jim Smith, had to stand in for the pair of them at the event."

The man to mediate was Fred Dinenage, TV presenter and Pompey board member, who ▸

had once notably appeared on *Tiswas* and received a custard pie to the face from Chris Tarrant for the privilege.

"The next morning, Fred got a call from Milan, asking what it would take to get Harry back," says Allen. "Fred reckoned it'd probably cost him a player. Fred phoned Harry and told him that Milan was really sorry and said he could buy someone else. Harry quipped that he wanted Thierry Henry."

Redknapp had to be content with Yakubu Ayegbeni from Maccabi Haifa, though that turned out well. Boosted by the 20-year-old Nigerian striker's seven goals, Portsmouth finished the season by securing promotion to the Premier League.

In four years, Mandaric had transformed Pompey. He'd arrived on the south coast to find a club in utter turmoil, but nothing could compare with the distress he'd experienced when he was young. During the Second World War, Yugoslavia was occupied by the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Hungary from 1941-45. "For four years, we were up in the mountains, hiding from enemies – my father was taken to a concentration camp," he later explained. "When we returned, our village had been destroyed."

Those painful experiences made Mandaric. Graduating from the Mechanical Engineering Facility in Novi Sad, he took over his father's workshop at the age of 21, helping to turn it into one of the biggest and most successful in Yugoslavia. That caught the eye of the country's socialist regime under Marshal Tito, which frowned upon private enterprises.

Denounced as a capitalist traitor, he and his family departed for Switzerland, before Mandaric headed to the USA – to Chicago, then California, where he became a leading figure in the early days of Silicon Valley. One of his very first business contracts came with a fledgling tech company called Apple.

In the US, he not only made a wad of cash but developed a passion for football, forging friendships with some of the most famous players on the planet and assisting in the launch of the North American Soccer League (NASL) franchise at San Jose Earthquakes. "That experience definitely stayed with him," reveals former defender Linvoy Primus, who joined Portsmouth a year after Mandaric's 1999 takeover. "You'd look into the stands at Fratton Park and spot George Best watching you. It was all a bit surreal."

Before Portsmouth, Mandaric had made his first moves into European football by taking a stake in Belgian side Standard Liege, then buying Charleroi and Nice, the club which new Manchester United investor Sir Jim Ratcliffe purchased in 2019. The French outfit actually won the Coupe de France under Mandaric – a hint of what was to come for Pompey – but were relegated, whereafter he sold his shares.

MANDARIC TRAVELLED ON THE TEAM BUS FOR HIS FIRST GAME: THEY LOST 3-0 TO DORCHESTER

Portsmouth were recommended to him by Preki, the Yugoslav-born USA midfielder who had plied his trade at the club for a solitary campaign in 1994-95 and fallen in love with the Fratton Park atmosphere. In May 1999, Pompey were languishing near the foot of the second tier under boss Alan Ball, after going into administration during the team's 1998-99 centenary season.

"Alan is the right man to take Portsmouth forward," declared Mandaric. "I have money available and I know things need to be done on the playing side." But instead of an instant return on his investment, the owner got three years of carnage – some of it self-inflicted.

It started badly, when Mandaric jetted in from Miami to travel on the team bus for the first game of the new era, against Dorchester Town that July, only for Portsmouth to lose 3-0. Ball was booted out by Christmas, failing to deliver with a squad on which Mandaric had already spent £4 million. Tony Pulis was next through the door.

"Milan gave him a fair amount of money," says Allen. "Though Tony bought a couple of players who'd help the club to win promotion a few years later, Milan wasn't happy about the style of play. He was placed on gardening leave so he could fight a court case against another club."



Below Mandaric took charge at Pompey with big plans and even bigger pockets

That case saw Pulis eventually settle out of court with Gillingham, having claimed unpaid bonuses following his messy exit after their play-off final loss to Manchester City. By the time that suit had been resolved, Pulis was out on his ear at Pompey and announced his intention to contest that, too.

Steve Claridge had been appointed in his place as player-manager – or had he? "Milan said he was only ever a temporary caretaker manager, not player-manager," insists Allen. Whatever Claridge's official title, his tenure ended after 25 games. Graham Rix was then given the job, despite being jailed two years earlier for indecently assaulting and having sex with a 15-year-old girl.

"It was probably the strangest end to any managerial reign – it just summed up all of the turmoil," reflects Allen. "I'll never forget Steve Claridge playing his last game for the club. Graham Rix was watching in the stands, Guy Whittingham took the team, and Steve looked completely destroyed."

"I WILL NOT GO DOWN THE ROAD"

Portsmouth survived relegation to the third tier on the final day. Ten months later, and still in the wrong half of the league even with the arrival of Croatia hero Robert Prosinecki, Rix was replaced by Harry Redknapp, who had already been brought to Fratton Park as director of football.

"There was a buzz about the whole place – the whole club felt different," recalls Primus of that moment. Further signings ensued. "Suddenly you were turning up at the training ground and seeing players like Shaka Hislop, Paul Merson and Svetoslav Todorov," the defender tells *FFT*.

Redknapp's charges won eight of their first nine league matches in 2002-03, sprinting into a lead at the top of the First Division that they never threatened to cede. "We got to Christmas and it was no longer about reaching the play-offs – it wasn't even about going up automatically; it was about winning the title," says Primus.

That's what they did, finishing six points above Leicester. The Mandaric and Redknapp bromance had hit its peak. After promotion was rubber-stamped, Redknapp laid bare the mutual reliance of their relationship.

"If I hadn't taken the manager's job, I don't think Mandaric would have stayed," claimed Redknapp. "He said, 'If I have a go with you and I fail, then at least I've had a go – a last throw of the dice'. I felt it was more important for the club that Milan stayed. That's the sole reason I took the job there. It wasn't because I wanted it." *[Very noble – Ed.]*

In keeping with the uncertainty that would pervade the pair's alliance, Mandaric didn't commit to staying at Pompey after securing their path to the promised land. "It's not just a question of whether I want to go or don't want to go," he confessed.

That summer proved the height of harmony between two hotheads who, it seemed, were never more than five minutes from another bust-up. After signing Teddy Sheringham and Patrik Berger, Redknapp's side came 13th in their maiden Premier League season, beating bitter rivals Southampton 1-0 in March.





Above Harry Redknapp, the man to unite rival fanbases **Left** "Can I have another player? Go on, just one. Or two. Or six"

Instead of providing a platform for bigger and better things, it preceded a meltdown in relations between owner and manager. In November 2004, Mandaric announced that Velimir Zajec had been hired as the club's new executive director. Within a week, Redknapp and Smith were gone.

"I will now take a short period of time to recharge my batteries before contemplating my future," explained Redknapp. "I will not go down the road – no chance." Two weeks later he was saying, "I'm delighted to join Southampton," in his unveiling at St Mary's. "You couldn't make it up, could you?" reflects Primus, laughing.

At Fratton Park, things went from bad to worse. Zajec became Mandaric Manager No.6 but had moved back upstairs by April. In his place stepped Frenchman Alain Perrin, who oversaw a 4-1 rout of Redknapp's relegation-bound Saints but soon alienated himself from the dressing room.

"He basically suggested the players weren't trying," says Primus. "There's no quicker way for a manager to lose the dressing room. It was completely disrespectful to a very good group of players."

Perrin lasted only seven months, by which time Pompey sat 17th in the Premier League. It appeared as though there were no twists left, but two days later Chelsea won 2-0 at Fratton Park. Frank Lampard Sr – the ex-West Ham assistant boss and Redknapp's brother-in-law – was in attendance to watch his son convert a penalty for the visitors. "Frank had a cup of tea with Milan, then phoned me on the way home," Redknapp later revealed. "Frank said, 'I think he would have you back'. It went from there."

Suddenly, from being the most hated man in Hampshire, achieving the rare feat of being disliked equally by fans of both Saints and Pompey, Redknapp was back. And Mandaric? He couldn't have been happier.

"After many hard-working days in the last couple of weeks," stated the owner, "it has finally come to the conclusion that I hoped: bringing back the man who left us a year ago, bringing him back to his home – our home. He has been the best manager in my time at this football club."

Having lost the manager he had recruited 12 months prior, Southampton chief Rupert Lowe described the whole soap opera as an "embarrassment to football". Despite slipping into the drop zone, Redknapp helped Portsmouth to take 20 points from their final 10 matches and remain in the top tier. Their greatest days still lay ahead.

RONALDINHO: FRATTON PARK FAN

"I joined a club that wasn't expecting to be competing for trophies – even in my wildest dreams, I didn't believe that we'd win an FA Cup or qualify for Europe," says goalkeeper David James, who swapped Manchester City for Portsmouth in the summer of 2006.

Just weeks beforehand, Mandaric had sold his stake in the club to 29-year-old Alexandre Gaydamak, who had become co-owner at the beginning of the year. "I can do this safe in the knowledge that I will place Portsmouth ▸

Football Club in the control of a person that has massive ambitions and will take this on to the next level," said Mandaric, who would later buy Leicester, then Sheffield Wednesday.

Acquiring Sol Campbell, Glen Johnson, Nwankwo Kanu and, of course, Niko Kranjcar, Redknapp guided Portsmouth to ninth place in 2006-07, their highest finish for 52 years. A season later, after the arrivals of Jermain Defoe, Lassana Diarra and Papa Bouba Diop, they rose to eighth and remarkably won the FA Cup, triumphing at Manchester United in the quarter-finals before Kanu's goal sealed glory over Cardiff in the Wembley showpiece.

'When Sol went up to lift the FA Cup' is still a song that reverberates around the stands at Fratton Park, 16 years since the Pompey skipper raised the trophy. Even that moment was surpassed on Southsea Common the following day (bottom).

"It was magical," smiles James. "Looking out and seeing more than 200,000 people is something that will stay with everyone who was there for that parade. It seemed like the whole of the region had come out to support us. That was when it really sunk in; when you realised just how much it meant."

Victory at Wembley earned Pompey a first ever appearance in Europe. In the UEFA Cup, they led 2-0 with six minutes to go against a Milan side that featured three Ballon d'Or winners, thanks to goals from Younes Kaboul and Kanu, on a night that led Ronaldinho to hail Fratton Park as "the best atmosphere in world football". Primus, who was on loan at Charlton, reminisces now: "Even watching on TV, you could almost feel the reverberations".

Yet Ronaldinho's 84th-minute free-kick gave the Rossoneri a lifeline, then Filippo Inzaghi – who had been denied by the woodwork three times – equalised in stoppage time (below





MANDARIC LEFT, AND YEARS OF OVERSPENDING PUT POMPEY'S VERY EXISTENCE IN JEOPARDY

left). Portsmouth exited at the group stage, and that was as good as it got. Redknapp had left for Tottenham weeks ahead of that Milan game; replacement Tony Adams was sacked inside four months; Pompey slumped to 14th; and off-field chaos started to set in.

Gaydamak flogged the club to Sulaiman Al Fahim, who then sold it to the mysterious Ali Al Faraj six weeks later, after star players had been shipped out and others had begun to go unpaid. Al Faraj's reign at Fratton Park lasted four months, before Balram Chanrai completed a takeover.

Avram Grant had succeeded Paul Hart as manager in November 2009, and Pompey did remarkably reach another FA Cup final that campaign, losing to Chelsea. In the Premier League, they hit rock bottom: 16 points from safety, having been deducted nine of them for entering administration, 11 seasons after Mandaric had bailed them out of a similar muddle. Following the Serb's departure, years of overspending on a dream that was never sustainable had put the club's very existence in jeopardy once more.


Pompey were denied entry to the Europa League due to their financial woes. Two years later, in 2012, they entered administration yet again, and the resulting 10-point penalty ultimately precipitated their relegation from the Championship – a level to which they will return next season. They finished as low as 16th in the fourth tier in 2015, but having led League One for much of this campaign, hopes that they might finally find their way back to the top two tiers of English football have finally come to fruition.

Portsmouth dream of rekindling the glories they enjoyed under Mandaric and Redknapp. The pair delivered days few thought possible – even if they never did sign Thierry Henry.

NOISY NEIGHBOURS

Part-owned by the City Football Group, minnows Girona emulated Manchester City by surging past Barcelona to gain Catalan supremacy and even topped La Liga this season. *FFT* speaks to those in the know to find out how

Words Andy Mitten



Barcelona supporters warmly greet the trickle of Girona fans going into the away section at the Camp Nou. It's a nondescript Monday in April 2023, and among the travelling few are couples like Xavi Bautista and wife Monica, wearing the scarves of each club.

Xavi is a lifelong Girona fan from the days when they had three-figure crowds for home games, while Monica supports Barça. They're simply happy to be there, for Xavi to see Girona, whom he once watched play fifth-tier football, in the same league as Barcelona. It's the only game of the season classed as so low risk that away fans are allowed to wear their club shirts in home sections.

The two clubs have never been rivals, since they've barely played each other. Girona, 62 miles north of the Catalan capital, are no threat. Els Blanquivermells hadn't played in La Liga until 2017 and, when they did, Barça fans were pleased for them. They have more fans in Girona than Girona, with coaches from the various supporters' clubs hitting the A7 motorway for every game at the Camp Nou.

Barcelona, on target to win the title, are 12 points clear of Real Madrid, with Cule fans relaxed and happy enough to applaud the visitors, who become only the third team to take a point at the Camp Nou all season. They want La Liga survival for little Girona, who have recovered from a poor start in their first season back in the top flight since relegation in 2019. There is applause, too, for the chants for Catalan independence, a sentiment both sets of fans share. It is a warm evening of mutual backslapping and appreciation.

Girona have never beaten Barcelona. Both clubs know their place in the pecking order.

THE SPANISH LEICESTER?

The next time Girona play Barcelona away, in December 2023 at Barça's temporary Olympic Stadium home, they win 4-2, and all hell breaks loose. Home fans boo and whistle angrily. The defeat, Barcelona's second in the league, represents the killing of the champions' hopes of retaining the title. The even bigger story is that Girona go top of La Liga, after 16 games. This is no surprise start to the season that quickly fades – sustained talk of a Spanish Leicester prevails. Girona's main aim this season had been staying up, yet by early February, a club who have never played European football were second in the table, six points clear of Barcelona and only two behind Real Madrid.

"Nobody expected this," says a delighted Xavi Bautista, one of the 2,000 away fans present in December. "Beating Barcelona ▸



> "YOU SEE GIRONA SHIRTS IN THE STREETS NOW – I KNOW THE OTHER CLUBS RESPECT AND ADMIRE US"

and scoring four comfortably was the highlight of an amazing season so far. We're in a Champions League position. The rest of Europe usually came to the Girona area for a holiday, I never imagined leaving the city to see Girona playing European football."

His reasoning is fair. Girona is no football hotbed and the club spent 49 years outside the top two divisions between 1959 and 2008. Basketball and hockey games were better attended in the city during the 1990s, and Girona's Montilivi stadium was fraying around the edges, with only three sides in use. For some time, the team's budget was typical of that of a mid-table second division club – they finished in the top four three times before winning promotion in 2017, the year they also became part of the City Football Group. We'll come to that.

Montilivi, located in a verdant, prosperous, upper middle-class neighbourhood by the city's university, seated just 7,000 until 2013, more than adequate for their modest support. Even in 2021-22 when the team were promoted back to La Liga, average crowds were only 5,972.

Temporary stands have been built around the small bowl of original seating to boost the capacity to 14,624 – more than enough for last season's average of 11,471, but it's full for almost every game now. That still only takes Girona from being last term's worst-supported top-flight team to 18th this, ahead of Getafe and Rayo Vallecano. The main stand, currently just a dozen rows of seating, is tiny and there are plans to rebuild in 2028. Work on a new training ground starts this year, but for now the first team train at La Vinya by the PGA Catalunya resort – a stunning location framed by the Pyrenees.

"Girona have historically played at the third and fourth level," president Delfi Geli tells *FFT*. Perhaps best known in England for scoring the extra-time own goal that gave Liverpool a 5-4 win over Alaves in the 2001 UEFA Cup Final, he's been in his current role for nearly a decade. He was twice a Girona player in the late-1980s and mid-2000s and also turned out for Atletico Madrid and briefly Barcelona.

"When I first played, it was a small club, very few fans in the regional third division, with economic issues just to survive. There were 800 to 1,200 fans at games. Players used to meet at a bar in the town. We'd play table football and chat. The actual table football game is now in the dressing room at the stadium, and the players can still play."

Geli, 54 and long a local, never thought he'd see Girona sitting first or second in La Liga. In his day, shirts on the streets were in



Above Girona's first victory against Barcelona sparked a title challenge

GROUP ACTIVITY

As well as Manchester City and Girona, the City Football Group has acquired a stake in 10 other clubs



NEW YORK CITY (2013)
A new franchise that played a first MLS season in 2015, the club signed Frank Lampard, Andrea Pirlo and David Villa for their launch, plus current Bournemouth boss Andoni Iraola. They were MLS Cup 2021 champions under ex-Celtic gaffer Ronny Deila.



MELBOURNE CITY (2014)
Previously known as Melbourne Heart, the club were rebranded following their January 2014 takeover by the CFG and have finished top of the A-League table in each of the previous three seasons, winning the Grand Final back in 2021.



YOKOHAMA F MARINOS (2014)
Having recruited Ange Postecoglou as boss, Marinos became J.League champions for the first time in 15 years in 2019 – they won it again under Kevin Muscat in 2022. Harry Kewell took over last year. The CFG owns 20 per cent, Nissan the rest.



MONTEVIDEO CITY TORQUE (2017)
Known as Club Atletico Torque before a name change, the club were only founded on Boxing Day 2007 but reached Uruguay's top flight in their first year in the CFG. After yoyo-ing around, they're now back in the second tier once again.



SHENZHEN PENG CITY (2019)
Five years ago, the CFG bought 46.7 per cent of Chinese third-tier side Sichuan Jiuniu, based in Chengdu. The club rose to the Super League for the first time this year and have now relocated 800 miles to Shenzhen, accompanied by a name change.







Barça's colours. "It's been wonderful for our players, staff, fans and sponsors," he says. "For everyone. You see Girona shirts on the streets. Other clubs respect and admire us, I feel that when I speak to people there.

"We'd been working towards getting in La Liga and at times it was very frustrating. We lost three play-offs in the last minutes. We were finally promoted in 2017, then went down in 2019. Our club's objective is to stay in this division, but also to have economic security and stability."

This season, Girona only lost three of their opening 25 league games, including home and away defeats to Real Madrid by a 7-0 aggregate score. They were missing two key players at the Bernabeu – one of them the suspended Daley Blind, who'd featured in every previous game and has shone all campaign. The 33-year-old former Ajax and Manchester United man joined Girona when it became clear Bayern Munich wouldn't extend last season's short-term deal, but Bayern to Girona is still a huge status drop.

Girona had to play to their strengths. The city, population 100,000, is one of the richest in Spain and culturally strong. The climate is temperate and sunny, it's picturesque and used as a setting in *Game of Thrones*, the food excellent: Girona restaurant El Celler de Can Rocca has twice been voted as the best in the world. Some of the world's top cyclists live in the city, close to the mountains, then there's the proximity to Spain's French border and the stunning Costa Brava. It's an area Blind knew about because so many Dutch people holiday there. Frenkie de Jong's early love for Barcelona came from spending summer holidays in Girona.

It was the football philosophy of coach Michel, formerly boss of Rayo Vallecano and Huesca, that convinced Blind. "The manager ▸

Above right "Did you know we're in *Game of Thrones*?; Montilivi has had some upgrades, with more expected



MUMBAI CITY (2019)
Already boasting the City suffix before their takeover (plus Peter Reid as manager), Mumbai became Indian Super League champions for the first time in 2021 and topped the regular season table again in 2023, before boss Des Buckingham joined Oxford. The CFG owns 65 per cent.



LOMMEL (2020)
The Belgian club finished third in the second tier in 2021, having recruited boss Liam Manning from a youth role at New York City. They slipped backwards after he joined MK Dons, but have shown promise again under former Arsenal centre-back and coach Steve Bould this term.



TROYES (2020)
The French club reached Ligue 1 in 2021 but have been battling relegation to the third tier this term, amid fan anger. Ex-Melbourne City manager Patrick Kisnorbo delivered awful results and Savio, on loan at Girona, may join Manchester City without playing at all for Troyes.



PALERMO (2022)
After years of off-field chaos that saw them drop to Serie C, the Sicilians were bought shortly after promotion back to the second tier. Under Eugenio Corini, le Aquile finished ninth in their first year in the CFG, and have been pushing for a return to the top flight this season.



BAHIA (2023)
Based in Salvador, north-east Brazil, the CFG's most recent acquisition – the collaboration with Istanbul Basaksehir involves no equity – finished 16th in Serie A last year. The legendary Rogerio Ceni is manager, so the current goalkeeper may now take all free-kicks and penalties.

gives us confidence and he's realistic," he tells *FFT*. "We're not a team top of the league who can dominate an opponent for 90 minutes, but when we can play, we do it. There's also room for mistakes and we don't change our style of play because of them.

"He likes the style of Spanish football. It's more technical than English, Dutch and German football. Players want the ball to feet – they're gifted and comfortable on the ball. I'm playing as a centre-back. It suits me well. Sometimes we play with three at the back, sometimes four. I try to help the team with my experience. It's difficult sometimes with the language, but I'm learning."

GUARDIOLA THE CHAIRMAN

You can't write about Girona without mentioning their ownership. In 2017, City Football Group acquired 44.3 per cent of the club, with Pep Guardiola's football agent brother Pere holding another 44.3 per cent and a fans' group the rest. It's not a link either party likes to play up – Girona are keen to keep their independence and make sure that no party owns more than 50 per cent. Girona have not taken the 'City' name and wear red not blue. The only change to their badge was to get rid of the royal crown,





Top to bottom Pere Guardiola (front row, second left) is a co-owner; president Geli; full-back Valery is highly rated

a bow to Catalan independence sentiments rather than any view in Manchester.

Many Manchester City executives holiday nearby on the Costa Brava and own homes there. It's where Pep Guardiola plays golf in the off season. His brother, Girona chairman, keeps a low profile. "Pere does a lot of work in the shade," one source tells us. "He's well thought of, he comes to some games, too."

Jordi Cruyff, Barcelona's sporting director until last summer, has been an interested onlooker at the club's progress. "Even though they're part of the City Football Group, they're well synchronised locally and they have independence from City," he tells *FFT*.

"I played with president Delfi Geli at Alaves and with the sporting director Quique Carcel at Barcelona. They're special people. Quique isn't in the media a lot. He's allowed to work and has complete authority on what he wants to do. They talk with the City Football Group, but he decides who they go for. They've made some excellent signings. Savio was a Brazilian who was at PSV Eindhoven and not playing. Yes, he's on loan from Troyes, also part of the City Football Group, but he's been fantastic at Girona."

Left-footed right-winger Viktor Tsygankov is on the other flank. "Then there's another Ukrainian, Artem Dovbyk, who nobody knew," says Cruyff. "He's going to be worth €40-50 million and nobody had heard of him."

Dovbyk was at Dnipro when Girona signed him for a club-record €7m in August. He quickly became top scorer ahead of former Middlesbrough forward Cristhian Stuani, who's often used from the bench.

"This season has been amazing," Tsygankov tells *FFT*. "We didn't think it would be like this.

It's already historic but it isn't done yet. The atmosphere has been incredible inside the club. It feels like a family and we help each other on and off the pitch. That's the secret. I feel great here. I'm learning Spanish, everything is positive, which really helps."

It's interesting that Tsygankov says Spanish, since Girona is the most 'Catalan' of the region's four capitals (Barcelona, Girona, Tarragona and Lleida). Catalan is routinely the area's first language – one Madrid-born coach Michel learned from his neighbours, hugely impressing locals – and is more widely spoken than in Barcelona. Over 70 per cent of people in Girona voted for independence in the unauthorised 2017 referendum. Fans sing 'Michel Catalan', a light-hearted chant to show they consider their coach, born and raised in the working-class *barrio* of Vallecas (home of Rayo Vallecano), to be one of them.

Michel's style of play is winning fans, too. "Modern football, with the full-backs coming inside and into midfield," Cruyff says. "Lots of changing of positions. Very offensive, dynamic and good in transition. When they recover the ball, their first thought is to go forward. Michel has done a very, very good job and he's left his stamp on the team. The club were also patient when they needed to be with him, and results weren't that good."









"THIS SEASON IS ALREADY HISTORIC BUT IT ISN'T DONE YET – THE CLUB FEELS LIKE ONE FAMILY"

Clockwise from top Michel has Girona playing an attractive tune; a fanbase re-energised; Dovbyk has shone in his first La Liga season

Tsygankov concurs. "I like his ideas and mentality," the 26-year-old says. "I've never seen such a motivated coach and he wants to put his theories into practice with us. In the future, he'll be at one of the biggest clubs."

Though underplayed, Girona's access to City Football Group's scouting network and information clearly helps. The club have also benefited from using Manchester City's training facilities in pre-season, as well as loans, recruiting promising City players on a temporary basis. Brazilian Yan Couto has spent the three of the past four campaigns on loan from City – since 2017, others to have made the same switch have included Yangel Herrera and Aleix Garcia, both now at the club permanently, plus Patrick Roberts, Marlos Moreno, Pablo Maffeo and Douglas Luiz, who later joined Aston Villa for £15m.

Manchester City see their playing assets appreciate if they can hold their own in Spain, while holding a substantial stake in a La Liga club. Yet local players have also featured prominently for Girona – Catalonia is a football factory and the club want to take advantage of the talent on their doorstep.

Rival fans accuse them of being just a little Manchester City and they've started to attract envious comments for the first time. There are even suggestions that, if both clubs qualify for the Champions League, a degree of structural change will be needed to circumvent UEFA rules that prevent the same entity from having "control or influence" over two sides in the same competition.

Girona, though, are content to have such growing pains. European football would mean they'd need permanent rather than temporary stands to house a burgeoning support, which now includes French Catalans from over the Pyrenees, whose ancestors left during the Spanish Civil War in the late-1930s.

"It was initially very difficult economically and a lot has changed in the 10 years since I arrived," sporting director Quique Carcel tells *FFT*. That was when Girona had entered insolvency proceedings with debts of £2.7m. Starting in 2015, Pere Guardiola was key to the sale that followed. "Under new owners, the club has become more professional. In terms of football, I was influenced by Johan Cruyff's style as a young player at Barcelona. We went for Michel as manager because he fitted our profile. He wanted what we wanted: attacking football, young players. He made an excellent impression right from the start. I consider it a privilege to work with him."

Carcel visits Manchester several times each year and liaises with City's director of football, Txiki Begiristain. The link-up works.

"The key question is how they retain their best players at the end of the season," says Cruyff. Savio has already agreed a deal to join, you guessed it, Manchester City in the summer. "There will be interest in their three attackers and the full-backs [Miguel Gutierrez, formerly of Real Madrid, who still hold 50 per cent of his rights, plus Couto, now a Brazil international]. Can they keep those types of players and become a top-six club, or do they lose them and become a trampoline club bouncing up and down?"

Girona have bounced around the leagues for most of this century. Right now, they've sprung to their highest ever level – certain to improve on last term's record-equalling 10th-placed finish. Barcelona's cuddly poor relations? Not this season and maybe beyond.



THE BIRTH OF REPLICA: A STITCH IN TIME

Fifty years ago, a small Midlands firm went from manufacturing nuns' knickers to selling the world's first replica football kits, just in time for Christmas. Almost by accident, Admiral opened the floodgates to a multimillion-pound industry...

Words Matthew Ketchell
Pictures © Chadwick | Archive, Getty/Alamy

In the 19th century, a search for gold famously captured popular imagination across America. A couple of centuries later, the commodity of allure across the land of opportunity seems to be polyester Pantone 1895C. People are scrambling for Inter Miami's soft, electric pink football shirts. Pink is the new gold, it seems.

The announcement that Lionel Messi would be signing for David Beckham's Inter Miami made their jersey the hottest piece of replica sports merchandise on the planet, and quite possibly of all time. It's the perfect capitalist storm: a distinctive colour, a new and exotic football club with the addendum of Beckham, fronted by an instantly recognisable and widely adored athlete in Messi.

Manufacturers Adidas won't be drawn on specific sales numbers – perhaps they've lost count – but they did reveal that within days of Messi announcing his next destination, the brand received 500,000 requests from stores and suppliers for Miami football shirt stock. Existing inventory had vaporised like a puddle in the hot Florida sun.

The shirt business is serious. In 2019, Real Madrid signed a kit deal with Adidas worth a guaranteed £955 million over eight years – the most lucrative contract in football history.

Yet half a century ago, the industry was non-existent. The birth of replica shirts can be traced back to October 1973, when two salesmen from Admiral drove 100 miles from Wigston in Leicestershire to Yorkshire for a meeting at a mail-order catalogue business on the outskirts of Leeds.

Armed with some rugby and football jersey samples, they presented their wares to an uninterested buyer and were back on the street inside half an hour. After a consolation full English breakfast at a nearby café, they realised a Leeds United training session was taking place just across the road. Don Revie's charges had made an excellent start to the season, and would finish it as First Division champions. The travelling salesman walked across the road, struck up conversation with Revie, and changed football forever.

THE DYNAMIC DUO

If Bert Partick and John Griffiths represented the Starsky and Hutch of 1970s sportswear, Griffiths would be Hutch. He was the quieter of the two; the logistics guy, reliable, brilliant on facts and detail. In 1973, he was Admiral's managing director, having climbed the ladder from factory floor to boardroom.

Company owner Patrick was a charismatic, streetwise networker, who had a hunch that opportunities might lie in football. He joined the business back in 1956 when it was known as Cook & Hurst, a family brand that had established itself as a manufacturer of nuns' underwear, hosiery and socks.

During the First World War, the brand was commissioned to provide garments for those serving in the Royal Navy. In an early marketing effort, Cook & Hurst created a character called 'The Admiral' – "If it's good enough for admirals, it's good enough for you."

The company later rebranded and expanded into sportswear, occasionally partnering with Bukta and Umbro, including for the 1966 World Cup: while England's outfield players wore Umbro, Gordon Banks' yellow goalkeeper jersey came from Admiral.

It was Griffiths who made the exhausting October 1973 car journey, with a sales rep in tow, and then headed to Leeds' training ground. "Don Revie was coming out through the gate," he recalled in the book, *Get Shirty*. "My colleague said, 'Mr Revie, I'd like you to meet my boss'. Revie stopped, shook hands and asked us what we were doing in Leeds.

"I gave him a brief version of how we'd been kicked out of our earlier meeting. He was interested in our samples, then invited us into his office for some tea. I explained how we were making football jerseys, how we'd got our own brand and were making progress. He said, 'What could you do for us?'



REPLICA KITS WERE MADE ONLY IN CHILDREN'S SIZES AT FIRST; ADULTS GOT THE PRE-MATCH TRACKSUITS







Top to bottom
"We couldn't have won it without this snazzy get-up"; Griffiths (centre) signs with Revie to make England's kits; showing the Italians how it's done; Bert Patrick was the Starsky to Griffiths' Hutch

"I said, 'It depends: what could we do for the home jersey?' He replied, 'Very, very little. Nothing. I want it to be all white – I use Real Madrid as an incentive for the players. But you can do what you like with the change strip and the tracksuit'."

It wasn't quite a 'eureka' moment. The idea to design a professional team's kits and sell replicas to fans had a gradual evolution. The author of *Get Shirty*, Andy Wells, tells *FFT* that the seed may have been planted earlier in 1973. "John Griffiths told me that a sales rep had gone into one of the local schools or sports clubs," he says. "A mother had asked, 'Do you do football kits exactly the same as the players? You know, the badge and the number on the back – identical'.

"He said, 'Oh no, we don't, actually'. The rep reported back to John, 'What about this? This is what I'm getting asked about'. I think that was the moment where they thought, 'Maybe there's a market for this'."

Sat opposite Revie in the Leeds manager's office, the dots began to join up for Griffiths. After a quickfire calculation, he made Revie a deliberately low offer there and then, for a radical arrangement where Admiral would





pay Leeds for the privilege of manufacturing their playing strips. Admiral would redesign the kit (staying true to Revie's request for the Real look to remain untouched) and, taking advantage of the 1968 Design Copyright Act, register the strip so that only Admiral could legally produce them.

Up until that point, both professional and amateur clubs simply bought generic, off-the-peg strips from retailers. Admiral were proposing to manufacture identical Leeds United kits in children's sizes to sell to fans, thus covering the cost of the new deal with Revie, as well as manufacturing costs, while also aiming to turn a profit.

"It was just lots of the right people in the right place at the right time," explains Theo Hamburger, head of sales and marketing at Admiral these days. "The right product, the marketing man holding his newly created sportswear range, opposite the best team in the league, with a manager happy to give them some money. Admiral had the fabrics and machinery. It was the perfect storm."

Griffiths and Revie agreed a five-year deal that would see Admiral pay Leeds £10,000 a year to design and supply their kits. Despite such a landmark contract, Griffiths was feeling apprehensive on the drive back to Leicestershire, hoping that company owner Patrick would be happy.



Top to bottom Leeds rocking the Real Madrid look; "Ooh, you made a right mess of this one, Deirdre"; Billy Bremner, 1970s style icon

As it turned out, Patrick later claimed that he himself had already laid foundations for the deal with Leeds, knowing Revie via his wife, the daughter of former Leicester player Johnny Duncan. According to him, Griffiths had simply finalised the agreement.

"I think both accounts are true," says Wells. "John Griffiths met Don Revie in the car park – that definitely happened. But Bert Patrick was a networker; he'd been doing the rounds and would have met the Duncan family. He would have got an introduction, and probably met Revie at a match. Bert may well have had a chat, Don said maybe, then it just so happened that John managed to move the deal on a bit more."

The relationship between Patrick and Griffiths would later end in acrimony, Griffiths moving to rivals Adidas. But in 1973, Admiral were in unfounded territory, having to supply the country's best club with new kits but also mass-produce replicas and sell them to cover their £10,000 investment.

Replica football kits hadn't been marketed nor sold before, so there was a significant element of risk. They had, however, chosen the perfect club. "Leeds were massive at the time, so Admiral definitely backed the right horse," continues Wells. "The club also had a mail-order business that was light years ahead of other clubs, plus an international fanbase, even then."

"THEY'LL BE BUST WITHIN SIX MONTHS"

Admiral weren't the first company to moot the idea of replica kits. Ultimately, others wouldn't take the plunge. "Nobody thought there was any money to be made out of it," remembers Wells. "Certainly Umbro didn't. Bobby Brown, Umbro's sales director at the time, used to ask his manager, 'What about Admiral?' His boss would say, 'They'll be bust within six months – there's no money in it'."

Famed sports illustrator Paul Trevillion – involved in the *Roy of the Rovers* and *You Are The Ref* cartoons – claims to have suggested the concept of replica shirts to Umbro in the early '70s, the same era in which he gave Leeds the idea of numbered sock tags. That particular novelty quickly faded and his sales pitch for replica kits fell on deaf ears – Umbro directors believed kids didn't have the money to buy them, and didn't appear to consider the notion that parents may fork out on their behalf. They also questioned why they should offer to pay clubs, when clubs were paying them at the time.

To emphasise the infancy of shirt deals in 1973, Leeds took to the field for the first time wearing their Admiral-branded strip in the same month as Griffiths' training-ground meeting with Revie. As no previous contracts nor regulations were in place, Leeds could do as they pleased, changing kit mid-campaign.

Serendipitously, the first game in the new outfit was at Leicester, just a few miles from Admiral's factory. The company logo featured on the chest and shorts, but other than that the home strip looked all but identical to the previous Umbro-supplied attire.

Supplying the kit to the team was painless, but Admiral then had to churn out replica strips in time for Christmas. Only children's sizes were produced initially; it would take the best part of a decade before adult sizes entered the market, though grown-ups were catered for with the tracksuits Admiral had also agreed to make, which the players wore while walking on the pitch prior to kick-off. Tracksuits retailed at about £8, the equivalent of £80 in today's money. "I reckon it made ▸









"ADMIRAL'S PLACE IS IN MAKING A GARMENT THAT CONNECTS YOU TO A POINT IN TIME"

you think you looked smarter with the proper tracksuit on," Leeds defender Norman Hunter later commented.

On December 22, 1973, Bert Patrick and John Griffiths were guests at Elland Road for Leeds' home game against Norwich. Revie's team were still unbeaten in the league, the mood was celebratory and the first replica jerseys were officially on sale to the public. "They both congratulated themselves," Wells tells *FFT*. "They were really up against it in terms of getting stuff out – had they not got the kits into shops for Christmas, I wonder whether it would have taken off."

Sales of Leeds' white home kit, a yellow away top and the tracksuit took even Patrick and Griffiths by surprise – they sold across the entire country, not just around Yorkshire. Admiral's venture quickly forced everyone in the sportswear world to react.

"They were pioneers," says Classic Football Shirts co-founder Doug Bierton. "Admiral disrupted the market, pushed boundaries and experimented. We've got a lot to thank them for." The popularity of replica kits paved the way for Bierton and business partner Matthew Dale to launch their football shirts business in 2006, selling classic versions of jerseys that are now the embodiment of the beautiful game.

Kits are a unique commodity: distinct, nostalgic, rare, and consistently increasing in value as the years pass. They're far more than just pieces of polyester – they can be huge currency. Today, Classic Football Shirts hire 135 people, operating out of a 35,000 square foot warehouse in Hyde, with retail stores in Manchester and London. "We hope to open international outlets next year," says Bierton. "That's a big goal for us."

THE LEGACY

No team in England's top four divisions wear Admiral currently. Plenty of Admiral kits pass through Classic Football Shirts' stock rooms, however. "We get the '73 Leeds one every now and again," Bierton admits to *FFT*. "But obviously they're so old, with a very delicate transfer badge – even if you get them brand new in the packaging, the badge is usually half worn away."

Just as Bert Patrick pivoted the brand in the '70s, modern-day Admiral have moved with the times: they turned heads earlier this year with a stunning shirt for Walthamstow FC in the seventh-tier Isthmian League North Division. Collaborating with the William Morris Gallery (Morris, the famous textile designer, was born in Walthamstow), the kit features a classic Morris-inspired print of exuberant flowers and kaleidoscope patterns.

Above Admiral made one of the most memorable England kits, as adorned by Kevin Keegan himself

"Admiral did something that no one else did," says Theo Hamburger, reminiscing about the brand's history. "They've spent 50 years delivering something that's embedded in the culture of the game. Yes, you can create super-technical garments that knock one second off a player's pace, but you can also create a garment that connects someone to a moment and point in time. That's the thing we talk about – the bit we love. For me, that's where Admiral's place is."

The seas have been quite rough for Admiral in the half-century since they shook hands with Revie. The company were denounced early on in Parliament for 'ripping off kids' with their exorbitantly-priced replica venture: £5 per shirt. That works out at £51.95 today. This season, a child's shirt for Premier League champions Manchester City retails at £60.

Admiral teamed up with Revie once again in 1974, when he was appointed England manager, and supplied Three Lions shirts for 10 years. They're one of only three brands to have seen their logo appear on an England jersey, along with Umbro and Nike.

At the height of their success, they made kits for more than 100 clubs and national teams. By the 1980s, however, other brands had caught up and started throwing their weight around. Admiral tried to keep pace, borrowing heavily from banks, but come the middle of the decade their Wigston factory had closed. While they survived, today they operate on a vastly different scale, dwarfed by the big beasts of the shirt market.

Their place in the history of replica kits will remain forever, though. A multimillion-pound industry originated over a cup of tea in Don Revie's office in 1973. As it happened, selling football shirts proved rather more lucrative than flogging nuns' knickers.


OFFICIAL
MATCH BALL
CHAMPIONS
LEAGUE

"I WANT TO



SET RECORDS THAT



LAST FOR 100 YEARS



IT'S ALL A BIT SURREAL"



Aged just 24, Ada Hegerberg became the first winner of the Ballon d'Or Feminin and the Women's Champions League's leading scorer. A year later, her career lay in tatters. The Norwegian pioneer tells *FFT* how injury focused her mind to extend her legacy...

Words Richard Laverty

Ada Hegerberg beamed with happiness as she towered over a gathering of the world's greatest footballers, holding her trophy aloft on the balcony at the Grand Palais in Paris.

The ornate art nouveau exhibition centre beside the Champs-Elysees will host fencing and taekwondo at this summer's Olympic Games – in 2018, it was the venue for a defining moment in women's football history. Little wonder Lucy Bronze, watching on from the audience, grabbed her phone to take a picture.

Bronze's Lyon team-mate had just become the first winner of the Ballon d'Or Feminin – like Stanley Matthews, the men's award's inaugural winner in 1956, it's a distinction that inscribed Hegerberg's immortality. "Young girls all over the world, please believe in yourselves," the Norwegian said during her televised speech that night.

An inspiration off the field as much as on it, there was little doubting she deserved her award. She pipped Pernille Harder, Dzsenifer Marozsan, Marta and Sam Kerr to top spot, on a night when Luka Modric received the men's prize.

Hegerberg had netted 53 goals in just 33 games during the previous season for Lyon, an annus mirabilis that yielded 15 goals in the Champions League – still a record for a single campaign, and almost twice as many as any other player that year – as Les Fenottes became European champions for a third successive year. Ten months after winning the Ballon d'Or, in October 2019, she'd score her 52nd Women's Champions League goal to overtake Anja Mittag as the competition's all-time leading goalscorer. She was just 24 years old.

Then, in January 2020, her world turned upside down. During training with Lyon, she ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee. She wouldn't kick a ball in anger for 21 long, excruciating months.

PRACTISING GUT HEALTH

In the four-plus years that have passed since that shattering injury, Hegerberg has played little more than 60 club fixtures. Following her October 2021 return, she struggled to rediscover peak fitness and last season missed another six months. Yet at no stage did she ever doubt that the movement, strength and devastating eye for goal that have defined one of Europe's deadliest forwards would reignite.

This season, it did. As she sits down to talk to *FourFourTwo* in early March, the Norwegian is joint top scorer in this season's Champions League, and duking it out with Paris Saint-Germain's Tabitha Chawinga in the race for the French top flight's golden boot.

"Perhaps it's been hard to see from the outside, but this is what I knew I'd get back to as soon as my body returned to a normal condition," says Hegerberg, now 28. "It's maybe easy to say now I'm on the other side, but I truly had no doubts about my capacity. It was more about finding the confidence to tackle the problem. I had to dig very deep to come back, with the right people behind me.

"The human body is very complex – outside my crew, there were a lot of doubts about me, from people who couldn't see what was going on. But in my mind, there weren't. All of my experience over the years has told me that if the preparation is good and the form is good, the goals will be there.

"It has been hard. You're in a period which marks your career, yet before that, I'd gone 10 years without an injury – it was so unfair that people soon put me in the 'fragile' box without even knowing. You have to surround yourself with people who support you and I've had that. It's nice now to put a little cross on that period and think about the exciting times to come."

To finally overcome the nightmare and return to full fitness, Hegerberg had to follow her instinct. "I had all of these old men telling me my problems, telling me what I should do, but I'm a woman, I know my body and I went on a completely different path, because I didn't believe in what they told me," she explains.

"I'm very glad I did that. Always follow your gut. I knew that if I could solve those problems, I'd get back on my feet and get back to doing what I love. I know how my body works. It sounds really arrogant, but it's not, it's just how confident I am in what I do. I've done it for a lot of years – I know how to be successful."

That mindset has helped her become one of the most iconic players in the women's game. Hegerberg hails from a footballing family. Both of her parents played the sport professionally, while sister Andrine – two











years her more famous sibling's senior – won 25 caps for Norway between 2012 and 2017, also having spells with PSG, Roma and Birmingham. No-one knew quite how far Ada would go, though.

A senior international at the age of 16, after impressing alongside Andrine for Kolbotn, the siblings both moved to Stabaek in 2012, then German top-flight club Turbine Potsdam in January 2013. It took just 18 months for Ada to convince Lyon to take her to France, this time without Andrine, after the younger sister had helped Norway to the Euro 2013 Final. Only Germany goalkeeper Nadine Angerer's two penalty saves in a 1-0 win prevented a major tournament victory just weeks after Hegerberg had turned 18.

This is her 10th Lyon campaign – when the opportunity to join them arose in the summer of 2014, she didn't flinch. "I really feel like I had a sense of the highest level before going to Lyon," she says. "We were two penalties from winning Euro 2013.

"Going to Germany was the right thing for me, because it was a hell of an experience. The training, mentality, discipline, that step prepared me to go to Lyon, because I felt like I went through it all at Potsdam. That's why

"I HAD ALL OF THESE OLD MEN TELLING ME WHAT I SHOULD DO. I'M A WOMAN, I KNOW MY BODY"

Clockwise from above Hegerberg is back in the Norway fold again; Ada's agility; her in-game intelligence stands out; "I bet that div didn't ask you two to twerk, did he...?"

I try to tell the next generation you should never be afraid to test yourself or be afraid to fail. That was a quality of mine, I didn't see any limits, but it can give you a little slap in the face sometimes.

"I love that attitude, though. My parents were very like that and when Lyon called that summer, I didn't hesitate at all. I knew it was what I had to do. I'd watched Lyon win the Champions League previously, I knew what they stood for. It was a match made in heaven. I'm proud of how I came – all of the experienced players welcomed me and I feel like I found my place there from day one."

European champions in 2011 and 2012, Lyon were searching for a transformative signing to return them to the elite. Wolfsburg had beaten them in the 2013 Champions League Final, then Hegerberg's Potsdam did for them in the last 16 in 2013-14.

PSG halted Lyon's European progress in Hegerberg's first season, but the Norwegian soon helped Les Fenottes embark on a period of unprecedented domination. In 2015-16, she scored 13 goals in just nine Champions League games, including one in the final as Lyon got their revenge on Wolfsburg to lift the first of a jaw-dropping five consecutive continental crowns. Hegerberg struck 48 times in the competition in that gluttonous half-decade and became the first player to hit a hat-trick in a Women's Champions League final against Barcelona in 2019.

"I'm proud of my journey, because I've been part of something huge historically," she says. "We won five Champions League titles in a row – even I have a hard time realising that. It's been some adventure. They're some of the best years of my life."

A WINNER – EVEN AT MONOPOLY

Hegerberg finished her first season back from that ACL injury with a goal and assist in the 2022 Champions League Final against Barcelona to complete her European half-dozen. It made her the only player to have scored in four different Women's Champions League finals, to go with eight French league titles. A reminder: she's still only 28.

Her long absence from the game, however unwanted, did at least provide the chance to take stock about her myriad achievements.

"What allowed me to have some time was that injury," she admits. "I don't think I would have otherwise because, it's crazy to explain, but everything goes so quickly. You hardly get a week or two to enjoy a successful season before your mind switches.

"That's how we work in top-level sport. Those who get success are those who can switch quickly. I was a bit naive in doing it so quickly when I was younger, but as I've grown I've learned to savour the moments."

Such moments come no finer than winning that inaugural Ballon d'Or in 2018. Yet her awards night was somewhat marred when French DJ and co-host Martin Solveig asked on stage if she "knew how to twerk" shortly after she received her prize.

Looking understandably insulted by the question – Solveig didn't ask men's winner Modric to perform the worm on command – Hegerberg responded with an immediate "no". It was a hugely awkward moment that made unwanted headlines on a night when *France Football* were trying to celebrate their ▸



new female award. Suffice to say, the DJ hasn't been asked back.

Hegerberg is no less proud at becoming the Women's Champions League's all-time leading scorer – at the time of our chat, she'd extended her tally to 64 goals, 13 clear of the previous mark set by Mittag. "I'll put it as high as possible so it can't be broken!" she laughs. "It'll be a bit surreal looking back at stuff like that, realising what I accomplished. I include what we have accomplished, too.

"When I'm done, I really hope I know that I sacrificed everything to do my best for the sport, to maximise my potential. I'm a crazy competitor, so I do it for myself, too, because I want to win. That's why I'm very excited for the next few years. I want to raise the bar for those records, so they're not beaten for another 100 years hopefully!"

Her competitive streak stretches to life off the field. Frustrated at being unable to play during her injury lay-off, she focused her mind on beating her agent at Monopoly. "If people play defensively, I go at them, and he was playing so damn defensively!" she laughs.

There's a lighter side to Hegerberg, yet she also demands the very best of herself and those around her. Immediately after a Euro 2017 group-stage exit with Norway, she stepped away from the national team in protest at the federation's treatment of, and lack of investment in, women's football.



Above Hegerberg sets a Champions League final record **Top** "I think I could get used to this..."

"I HAVE TO HAVE A RELAXED SIDE TO NOT BECOME TOO MUCH OF A MANIAC"

She missed the 2019 World Cup and didn't return until March 2022 after positive talks with the federation's new president Lise Klaveness, her former international team-mate. She says she has no regrets about foregoing five years of her national team career, standing her ground despite the federation making small changes on and off the pitch during that time period.

"Honestly, when I make my decisions I never go back and think I should have done this or that," she says. "I'm very at peace with my decisions, I follow my gut. I do reflect, but I follow my intuition. It's been way too rocky in terms of results and on a personal level I'm used to being in a winning position with my club.

"Norway is a very small country, we have to maximise what we have and the truth is we haven't, but it shouldn't mean we're not positive about the future. It just shows there's a lot of work to do, to maximise the potential and quality we do have."

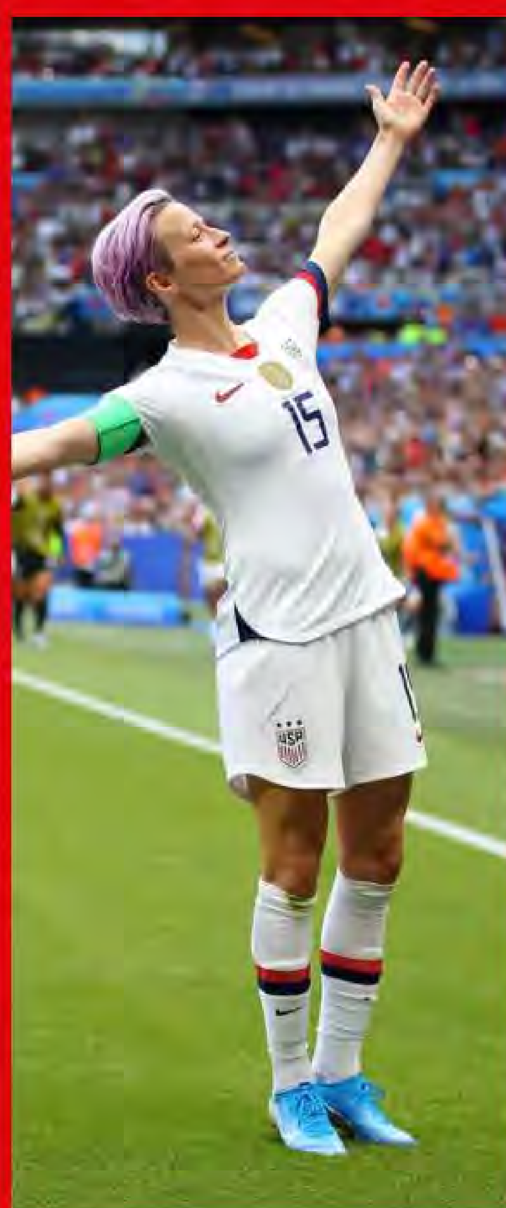
While Hegerberg has the platform to speak out on key issues, she admits it's also down to who she is as a person.

"It's pure passion as well, seeing the right decisions being made," she says. "It's crazy, but we have to stay on our toes going into every new season as players, because if it weren't for all of the pioneers, especially women, having the guts to stand up for their sport, it would be so different. We're very

HEGERBERG'S BALLON D'OR SUCCESSORS

MEGAN RAPINOE
2019

Hegerberg finished behind three World Cup stars. Having won the Golden Boot and Golden Ball as the US clinched a fourth world crown, Rapinoe triumphed ahead of Lucy Bronze and team-mate Alex Morgan. She stood up off the pitch, too. "I'm not going to the f**king White House," she'd said pre-tournament, even in victory, in protest at president Donald Trump.



ALEXIA PUTELLAS
2021, 2022

After the Ballon d'Or was controversially cancelled in 2020 because of COVID, Putellas claimed the next two awards – the Spaniard was the key player as Barcelona claimed their first ever Champions League title in 2021, with Lyon's run finally coming to an end during Hegerberg's long lay-off. Sadly, Putellas' domination was also ended by an ACL injury.



AITANA BONMATI
2023

With Putellas sidelined, the prize simply passed to one of her Barcelona team-mates. Deservedly so, after Bonmati not only helped her club to secure the Champions League again, but was also Spain's best player as La Roja won the World Cup. The midfielder led the Ballon d'Or vote by a landslide – her 266 nominations pushed her way ahead of second-placed Sam Kerr, on 87.





each one, because they bring back a lot of good memories, but the improvement in technical level was very interesting to see.

"Analysis is very important, but so is *how* you use it. I'm disciplined in performance, I have a system. It can eat me alive a little bit sometimes, so I have to have this more relaxed side of me to not become too much of a maniac.

"My father constantly talks to me about being in a good period where things are going really well – that's when you need to be so alert, be even harder on yourself and pick up the extra details to become better. However, on the opposite side when you're struggling, and we all have those periods every season, that's when I learn to become a bit better with myself in the mental aspect, get back to basics and treat myself with a bit more positive feedback. I truly believe when you're at the top of your game is when you're the most self-critical."

Her family's footballing background has clearly been a huge benefit. The Hegerberg sisters had a good grounding – their parents regularly follow them anywhere they can.

"It's truly a gift," smiles the forward, who in 2019 married former Celtic, Wigan and Norway defender Thomas Rogne. "My parents always understood the mechanisms of football. It's not just football, it's a game of power, my parents always said. You're being constantly tested, being a young girl, becoming a woman and being tested in lots of situations. I think they always knew this. I think about the next generation and how you can treat them in the best way, so they can perform in the best way possible.

Above The Lyon forward is at the forefront of instilling change

lucky to be in this position and we have the responsibility to take that on. It's part of me."

One of the key current topics is scheduling, which many believe is one of the drivers behind the ACL epidemic in the women's elite game. Since Hegerberg suffered her own knee injury back in 2020, Sam Kerr, Leah Williamson, Beth Mead, Catarina Macario, Vivianne Miedema and so many others have suffered the same fate, as the calendar becomes more and more condensed.

"I've been pulling at this topic a lot in the past few months and I see players are really trying to make an impact in the media," she says. "I'm actually impressed that we have the energy, first of all, and secondly that people want to take on that responsibility.

"At some point now, someone needs to come to the stadium and say, 'Hello, now it's up to us to do this for the players'. The players can only do so much, they're playing two or three matches every week. We need leaders, federations... FIFA needs to start flexing muscle and addressing the subject, as I'm impressed by how much players have taken up the responsibility."

NORWAY'S KICK-ASS QUEEN

Hegerberg's sense of responsibility extends to improving Norway's fortunes. Since their biggest star ended her international exile in 2022, the 1995 world champions exited the Euros in the group stage – beaten 8-0 by England – and fell to Japan in the last 16 of the 2023 World Cup. In February, Gemma Grainger – the former Leeds, Middlesbrough, England Under-17s and Wales boss – took charge of her first matches as Norway's new manager. They comfortably beat Croatia in a two-legged UEFA Nations League play-off, before the start of qualifying for Euro 2025.

"In the last years, there's been a complete lack of stability with the national team," says Hegerberg, bluntly. "There have been way too many changes, coaches in and out, and it's been hard to find the stability you need to work towards a major tournament. It's not something that happens over a couple of months. It's a culture, a style of play.

"They've gone for someone outside that federation culture. It's a new path, which is exciting, and now it's up to us, and up to Gemma with us, to find that stability. There's lots of work to do. We have important games straight up, so there's no time to dwell. We have to start building and work hard.

"International football is based on hard work on the pitch, to create our 'together culture' where you can see everyone on the pitch is working hard, and I don't think we've always shown that."

As Hegerberg moves into the second half of her career, what is it that continues to drive on a player whom, at club level at least, has done almost everything there is to do? Is there room for more?

"When I was injured, I watched loads of games I played in and that helped me a lot," she says. "I looked at how my game was and how I wanted to evolve. I probably watched the Champions League finals five or six times,

"They will face adversity – a lack of confidence, people telling them they're not good enough. My mum and dad knew those things, having been in the game themselves, so they backed me 100 per cent mentally, because every step of the way, they knew what I was going through.

"I'm very grateful for the voice they've given me. From them, it's in my DNA to stand up for yourself and others, use your voice for what you think is important. A huge thank you to them, I hope I can raise my kids the way they raised me and Andrine. All of the success I have, I share with them."

She's determined to ensure that those who come after her can emulate her and the sport's other biggest stars, even if it does mean one day that her records might be broken. "I really believe in giving the next generation inspiration to come up and steal our spots one day, and be at an even higher level than we're at," she says. "It was men's football all the way when I was growing up, but what I'm pleased about now is both young boys and young girls look up to female footballers – I find that very kick-ass.

"The more you educate people, the more you inspire people. We still have a long way to go, so it's about educating people all the time, but I've really enjoyed seeing it change."

Hegerberg remains pivotal to that evolution. Few footballers have effected such change in the past decade to transcend their sport with a passion that will burn for years yet.

KLOPP'S GREATEST LIVERPOOL GAMES



The German's nine-year reign has produced memorable matches aplenty – Ian Rush, Jamie Carragher, the *Liverpool Echo* and *This Is Anfield* pick eight for the history books

Interviews Ed McCambridge

January's unexpected announcement that Jurgen Klopp would be leaving Anfield at the end of this season took English football by surprise, and sent the red half of Merseyside into a prolonged state of mourning.

The former Mainz and Borussia Dortmund manager arrived on these shores back in October 2015, replacing Brendan Rodgers in the Liverpool dugout, and swiftly won over fans with his heavy-metal football, bear hugs and off-the-wall press conferences.

In the years since, Klopp has become one of the club's all-time greats. From a dramatic victory over Dortmund that catapulted the Reds to a European final in his first season as their boss, to Champions League glory in 2019 and then the end to Liverpool's 30-year wait for a league title a season later, deposing Pep Guardiola's Manchester City, it has been quite the ride.

Now, those who have witnessed it all share with *FourFourTwo* the matches from Klopp's tenure that they'll forever cherish the most.



LIVERPOOL 4-3 BORUSSIA DORTMUND

APRIL 14, 2016
EUROPA LEAGUE QUARTER-FINAL
SECOND LEG

MATT LADSON
CO-FOUNDER AND EDITOR, *THIS IS ANFIELD*

This was one of the first nights during Klopp's tenure that Liverpool fans lined Anfield Road ahead of a fixture. The players posted videos from the bus on social media and later spoke about the inspiration those scenes had given them. The special bond between the fans and Klopp's Liverpool was forged that night.

IAN RUSH
CLUB LEGEND (660 APPEARANCES)

It's always difficult when you become the manager of Liverpool but Jurgen won people round straight away with his personality. He was so nice, so engaging, and he proved quite quickly what a brilliant tactician he was as well. Even before that match, you were thinking, 'This is too good to be true!'

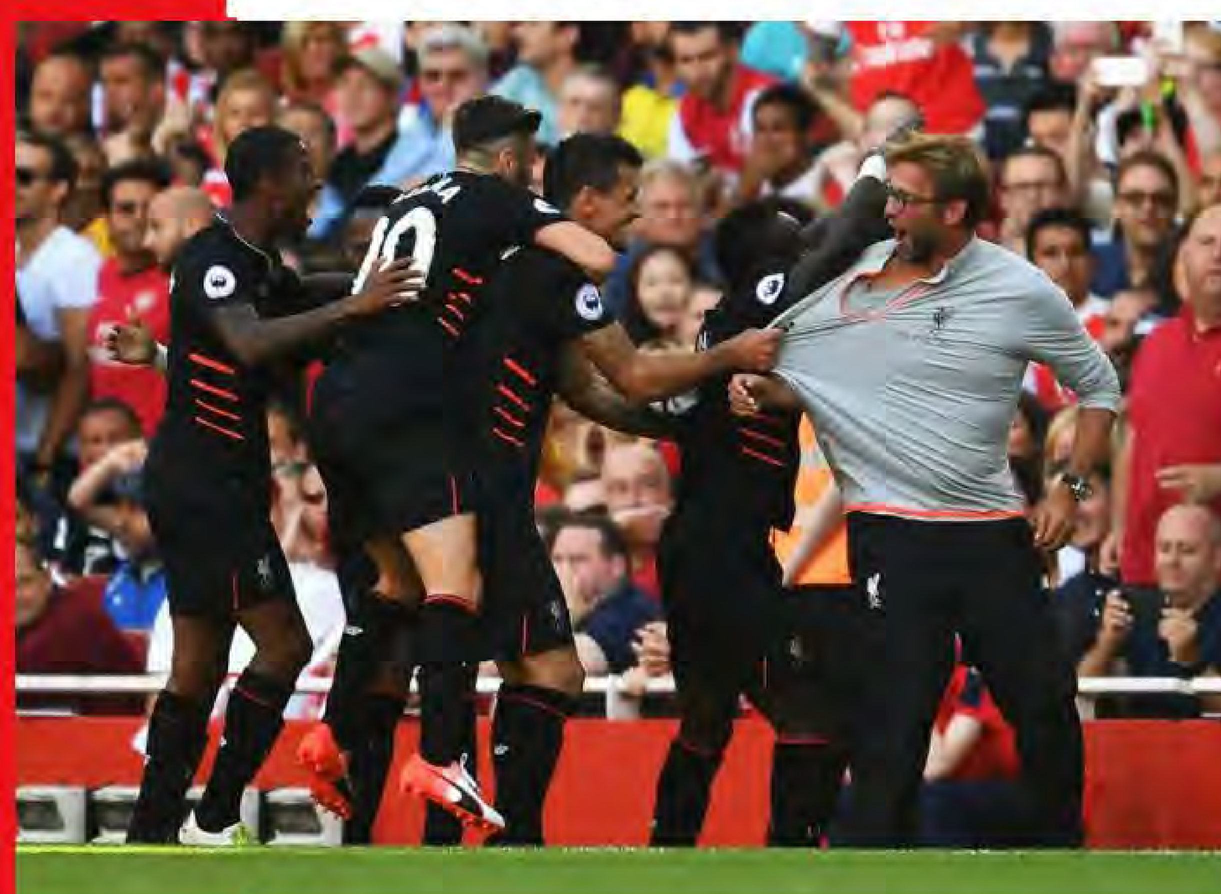
JAMIE CARRAGHER
CLUB LEGEND (737 APPEARANCES)

I was in the Main Stand with my son, just as supporters. It was a huge match not only in terms of the occasion but also because it was Dortmund, Klopp's old club, and he'd only just joined Liverpool. The first leg had finished 1-1 a week earlier and their fans had given him this extraordinary 'welcome home' reception, so it felt as if they had a piece of his heart still. It was fascinating to see how he dealt with that back at Anfield.

PAUL GORST
LFC CORRESPONDENT, *LIVERPOOL ECHO*

When Dortmund went 2-0 up after nine minutes, it looked like game over, especially with the squad Liverpool had at the time, which wasn't anywhere near the level it would become. But the first hints of what lay ahead in the Klopp era came to the fore that night. Mamadou Sakho made it 3-3 in the 77th minute and the whole stadium was bouncing.

CARRAGHER Reading the names of who scored the goals for Dortmund that night – Henrikh Mkhitaryan, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, Marco Reus – you can tell what a good side it was. But that win, with Dejan Lovren scoring in the 91st minute and the celebrations that followed, helped to cement the idea that Jurgen was fully invested in Liverpool. I think that was the first truly special night at Anfield under Klopp – the first time he found out that anything was possible on nights like those.





Top Facing the Kop ahead of a reunion with Dortmund **Above** This is why he doesn't wear suits **Top right** Back with a bang on Liverpool's Champions League return

ARSENAL 3-4 LIVERPOOL

AUGUST 14, 2016
PREMIER LEAGUE

GORST Over the summer, Sadio Mané, Gini Wijnaldum and Joel Matip were among those who came in, so the building blocks had started to be put in place. After an eighth-placed finish the season before [Klopp having arrived after it had begun], the remit was to qualify for the Champions League – there was a very clear target in mind.

CARRAGHER You always get excited seeing the new season's fixture list and Arsenal away represented a really tough opening game. Mané had come in for a fair bit of money and there was a lot of hope that he would bring some respectability back to Liverpool. Then Arsenal took the lead in the first half and you were wondering if it was going to be a tough start to the campaign.

GORST Especially in the early days, Liverpool could leave the back door open when they went for it, so conceding goals was inevitable sometimes. But, when things clicked, teams just couldn't deal with them. Philippe Coutinho and Adam Lallana made it 3-1 in a wild period either side of half-time, then up stepped Mané with an incredible solo goal.

LADSON The overriding memory of that game was Mané's goal and the celebrations that followed, with him jumping on Klopp's back. I think even the gaffer said he got swept up in the emotion of that moment and he probably should have remained more composed. But that was the moment supporters really knew that this manager was creating something special. Arsenal came back late on, but it wasn't enough for them to rescue a draw.

CARRAGHER Mané went on to have an excellent campaign. Without those massive performances, I don't think Liverpool would have finished in the top four that year and maybe the signings that followed him to Anfield wouldn't have come in. I'll always have a soft spot for Mané because of that. He was Klopp's first major signing, and what a brilliant signing that proved to be.

LIVERPOOL 5-2 ROMA

APRIL 24, 2018
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINAL FIRST LEG

LADSON After three years away, it felt incredible to be back in the Champions League in 2017-18 – it's the pinnacle of European football. We had a good run to the semi-finals and this was the year when the fans adopted 'Allez, allez, allez' as our anthem for the journey. There was an epic atmosphere at Anfield when Roma came to visit in the semis. We expected a tight game, so to be 5-0 up at one stage was crazy. We were singing and dancing in the stands.

GORST I think that Mohamed Salah, who we had signed from Roma only during the ▸

previous summer, was probably the best player in the world that night. He put two goals past Alisson to make it 2-0. The first one was a stunning curler off the far post and the second one, particularly, was just pure class – he dinked it over one of the most imposing goalkeepers in world football and made him look totally ordinary. Then he set up both Sadio Mané and Roberto Firmino for tap-ins. He was unplayable.

CARRAGHER Of course, Alisson would go on to have an incredible impact at Liverpool himself. But I think that when you look back at Jurgen's time at Liverpool, there's going to be two or three things that really stand out, and that front three – Mané, Salah and Roberto Firmino – is one of those things. That's something people will always talk about, for decades to come. That season was when it emerged. The original team he built centred around that trio. And that was also the season that we became a European giant again. In some ways, we always are, no matter how badly things might be going domestically, but you have to keep proving it and we did it again that year. Roma represented a pretty decent draw in the semi-finals and we managed to get back to a first Champions League final since 2007. It didn't go the way that they had hoped in the final against Real Madrid, losing 3-1 in Kyiv, but getting there was a sign that Liverpool were back at the very highest level.

Below Beating Barcelona 4-0 was special in every sense of the word **Right** All smiles before kick-off... until the first whistle blows

LIVERPOOL 4-0 BARCELONA

MAY 7, 2019
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINAL
SECOND LEG

LADSON I'd been out to Barcelona for the first leg, as I'd always wanted to see Lionel Messi playing for Barcelona. He delivered an



absolute masterclass, scoring twice and teeing up Luis Suarez, which wasn't exactly what I'd wanted to see. Liverpool hadn't even played badly but it looked like game over before the second leg even kicked off.

CARRAGHER People also often forget that the night before this game, Vincent Kompany scored that late goal for Manchester City against Leicester to basically win them the Premier League title. So, you can imagine Klopp and his players all watching that game and feeling that disappointment just before going to bed. Then you have to get yourself up to play against Barcelona, who are 3-0 up from the first leg. Added to that, you've got no Salah or Firmino, who were both injured. Klopp famously said to his players in his pre-match talk, "I wouldn't believe it's possible to win this game unless it was you I was looking at – the players in this room make me believe". That's what Jurgen is all about: making players feel that they can do things that maybe they don't think themselves.



"THAT DISPLAY MIGHT NEVER BE SURPASSED BY ANY LIVERPOOL TEAM. IT WAS THE GREATEST NIGHT IN ANFIELD'S HISTORY"



GORST Long before kick-off, the atmosphere at Anfield was spine-tingling, it really was. Anfield is known for that, of course, but this was something different – something even more special than usual.

RUSH I was sitting next to Gerard Houllier in the stand and when Divock Origi scored the first goal after seven minutes, the roof came off the place. Once things are in motion at Anfield on those nights, it's pretty impossible to stop them. I remember praying that Barcelona wouldn't get a goal back, as, had they scored, we would have needed five!

LADSON It wasn't all one-way traffic – Barcelona had their chances and we were struggling with injuries. Andy Robertson had to come off at the interval for Wijnaldum, and Jordan Henderson was so hurt that he had to keep his knee moving on an exercise bike at half-time in order to get back out there for the second half. Wijnaldum then scored a couple of goals in quick succession after the break and, by that stage, Anfield was absolutely rocking. You could hardly hear yourself think.

RUSH It was the manner in which Liverpool scored that fourth goal – the quick thinking from everyone involved, from the ball boy to Trent Alexander-Arnold to Divock Origi – that made the whole evening feel like a dream.

CARRAGHER To put in that type of stellar performance, with a weakened team, is why that display might never be surpassed, not just by a Klopp team but by any Liverpool team. It was the greatest night in Anfield's history, in my opinion.

RUSH I agree with Carra. It's the greatest night in the history of Anfield, and right up there with Istanbul in terms of the best Liverpool games ever. A few of us went up to the boardroom after the game, Jurgen came in and we were all still celebrating – we couldn't believe what we had seen. But he was so controlled. He was happy, obviously, but focused on the next game already. He was nothing like us.

LIVERPOOL 3-1 MANCHESTER CITY

NOVEMBER 10, 2019
PREMIER LEAGUE

GORST Liverpool had started the 2019-20 season in electric form and a couple of late goals the week before downed Aston Villa to keep them six points clear at the top going into the game against City, the champions in each of the previous two campaigns. I always remember Klopp in the pre-match press conference, saying, 'Everyone has to be on top form, and that includes the guy selling hot dogs'.

LADSON Fabinho scored an absolute rocket to put us 1-0 ahead, then Salah and Mané scored headers to put us out of sight. It was a brilliant, intense encounter between the two best teams in England over the past several years. We were just too good during that period.

CARRAGHER That week won the league for Liverpool. After that Villa win, even though there was still a long way to go, it almost felt like the league title was up for grabs for Liverpool. Klopp wouldn't have allowed his players to get carried away so early in the season, but most people would have said they had one hand on the title. They ended that season miles ahead, on 99 points.

RUSH We had to wait 30 years for Liverpool to win another league title and it was very frustrating as a former player and a fan to witness – when they finally got over the line that season, it was tough, because COVID meant they couldn't celebrate properly with a full house. I was fortunate enough to be there for the trophy celebrations, but it was a shame that not everyone could be there for that moment.

CARRAGHER Liverpool are the only team that have put a chink in City's armour in terms of winning titles over the past few years. They took a Premier League away from them, they knocked them out of the Champions League in 2018, they beat them in the FA Cup on the way to winning it in 2022. Klopp has had the ability and tactical intelligence to get under Pep's skin more than any other manager during their careers, and their clashes have rarely disappointed. It's been one of the great English football rivalries. ►

VILLARREAL 2-3 LIVERPOOL

MAY 3, 2022
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINAL
SECOND LEG

GORST My overriding memory is of the weather in Spain that day. I was out there and it had been belting it down. By the time we had got to the stadium, the pitch was waterlogged. El Madrigal's a small, tight stadium – only about 20,000 – and there was a very strange atmosphere in the air. Liverpool were 2-0 up from the first leg at Anfield and probably thought it was going to be plain sailing. It wasn't.
LADSON We didn't have a particularly large squad and games were coming thick and fast. We looked exceptionally leggy from the first whistle. When Villarreal went 2-0 up in the first half, you were thinking 'Hang on, we might be in serious trouble here'.
CARRAGHER I was at the game as a pundit and was a little bit worried when Liverpool went 2-0 down. But by that stage you always had so much confidence in a Klopp side to get the job done.
GORST Fabinho fired one in after the break, then 12 minutes later we were 3-2 up and out of sight on aggregate. Luis Diaz had come on to score. He has been another tremendous signing during the Klopp era – a player who just hit the ground running as part of a well-oiled machine.
CARRAGHER They went on to lose that Champions League final – a third defeat under Klopp in a European final, if you include the Europa League final against Sevilla after the win over Dortmund in 2016. That, on top of finishing runners-up in the Premier League that season with 92 points, was a huge blow. Klopp had been on course for a Quadruple and fell agonisingly short in the two biggest competitions. It almost felt like a disappointing campaign, which is ridiculous considering they won the FA Cup and the League Cup.
RUSH In comparing the recent Liverpool side with the sides I played for in the 1980s, you'd have to say that clinical edge was the key difference – just getting over the line and winning those medals. That's not to compare them in terms of quality, as Klopp's Liverpool have been so entertaining and won plenty of silverware themselves. But you might argue they should have won even more, as they've been consistently brilliant.

LIVERPOOL 7-0 MANCHESTER UNITED

MARCH 5, 2023
PREMIER LEAGUE

GORST I think Liverpool were still feeling the pain of missing out on the Quadruple, going into the 2022-23 campaign. It wasn't a good campaign for Liverpool and Klopp was starting to look worn down. They were out of the title race, out of the cups and about to be knocked out of the Champions League when Manchester United arrived at Anfield in March. Fans were just praying for a win.
CARRAGHER It was a strange one, as Cody Gakpo's goal made it just 1-0 at half-time and you were expecting a knife-edge second half, then all hell broke loose and Liverpool scored six goals unanswered. That game will be talked about in 20 or 30 years' time – it will be remembered more fondly than some trophy successes. Against your biggest rivals, you never expect to win 7-0. It will never be surpassed – nobody will ever beat Manchester United 8-0. Liverpool supporters will cherish it forever. As will I, especially knowing Gary Neville as I do!
RUSH I think Liverpool took their foot off the gas towards the end. They could have scored more, but instead they started showboating. There were four different goalscorers as well, which is impressive. It's a clash between the two biggest clubs in England; probably the biggest rivalry and the most supported teams in the world. We were in dreamland.
LADSON I enjoyed it, of course, but I think it would have been all the more enjoyable had we won some silverware that season. It was one of the worst campaigns we had under Klopp, yet we still battered some teams – including Bournemouth, 9-0. We still had brilliant players, but we lacked consistency. The thing that surprised me most was that Erik ten Hag somehow survived the mauling. I'm not sure any Liverpool manager, Klopp included, would survive getting thrashed 7-0 at Old Trafford.



Clockwise from right "No, it's mine"; winning with kids (sort of); "Nobody will ever beat Manchester United 8-0," says Carragher, laying down the gauntlet; focused ahead of Villarreal

CHELSEA 0-1 LIVERPOOL

FEBRUARY 25, 2024
LEAGUE CUP FINAL

GORST The announcement that Klopp would be leaving took everyone by surprise – even those of us that cover the club on a daily basis. After the news broke in late January, we were summoned to the official press conference, which was far busier than usual. He spoke for a while about his fatigue and reiterated his reasons for wanting to leave,





then afterwards myself and some colleagues on the national titles got a little extra time with him as well. He was really relaxed and mentioned that it was time for him to spend more time with his family and take a break. The League Cup final, a few weeks later, represented the first proper chance for the city to say goodbye to one of the all-time great Liverpool bosses.

LADSON Klopp has previously spoken of his appreciation for the League Cup because he believes semi-finals and finals so early in the season can help foster a winning ambition ahead of the run-in. He was forced to name a second-string side due to the likes of Salah, Darwin Nunez and Dominik Szoboszlai being absent. He also named five youngsters on his bench who had barely started a senior game of football in any competition during their careers. Three of them were on the pitch when Virgil van Dijk scored the winner in extra-time. That was symbolic of everything Klopp believes in as a manager: giving young players a chance to shine and giving them the confidence to compete at a senior level.



CARRAGHER I was so proud of that team. That was one of the best trophy wins under Klopp. The bravery of Jurgen to bring those kids on before extra-time was something special. To beat Chelsea, who've been a rival for a long time and almost our opposite with Liverpool being the old establishment and Chelsea being nouveau riche, was massive, particularly given the money they've spent under Todd Boehly. Watching Liverpool win that day, you felt very proud. If Liverpool had lost that, it would've put a lot more pressure on winning another trophy this season.

RUSH It comes down to man-management and that Klopp was brave enough to play them in a final. They didn't let him down. It's a huge thing to play at Wembley when you're young. In only my second game for Liverpool, I played in the League Cup final replay and we won, beating West Ham. Winning a trophy at such a young age gives you that confidence. This current crop will feel that way – they have a medal to their name already. Klopp gave them the platform to go on and do better things.



DUEL IN THE SNOW

City rivals St Pauli and Hamburg are going head-to-head for promotion to Germany's top tier this term – *FFT* hot-footed it to the Millerntor to watch the two teams face off

Words Ed McCambridge


SP
BUNDESLIGA
1
FERNANDES

Paul McCartney famously remarked that Hamburg "nearly wrecked" the Beatles. An early line-up of the 'Fab Four' – featuring Pete Best on drums instead of Ringo Starr – arrived on the city's infamous Reeperbahn in 1960 in a bid to launch their fledgling project, and returned to Merseyside two years later, "looking like skeletons".

After screeching into Hamburg's central train station on a teeth-chattering December evening, it doesn't take *FourFourTwo* long to see what all the fuss was about. Germany's largest port city, dubbed the "Gateway to the World" by the hardy locals, is connected to the North Sea by the icy river Elbe. More than 7,000 container ships visit here annually and, as *FFT* watches cranes load giant, barnacle-ridden ships in the harbour for a minute, the thought of shuffling into the nearest pub for a quick rendition of *Love Me Do* soon appeals.

Alas, we're not here for era-defining pop hits, but for one of European football's more curious city derbies: St Pauli against Hamburg. The 'Stadtderby' isn't your typical cross-town rivalry, given its participants have rarely found themselves in the same division. While the former have spent the majority of their 114 years in the second and third tiers, Hamburg, a founding member of the Bundesliga in 1963, have hoovered up half a dozen German championships and three DFB-Pokals, as well as the 1983 European Cup.

While few outside Germany could name a single player in St Pauli's history, Hamburg's roll off the tongue. There's Kevin Keegan, who won the Ballon d'Or twice during a sparkling three-year spell with 'Die Rothosen' ('The Red Shorts') at the end of the '70s, or Uwe Seeler, whose blistering right foot, chiefly responsible for 490 goals in 580 games from 1954-72, has been immortalised in a colossal statue at their Volksparkstadion home.

"Historically speaking, we're one of German football's biggest and most successful clubs," insists Football Fanatics Hamburg fan group member Julius Hillebrand prior to tonight's clash. "St Pauli fans themselves would admit they haven't enjoyed much on-field success. We've spent most of our histories in different leagues, with most of our derbies coming in the cups as a result."

Indeed, in the 55 years from the formation of the Bundesliga to 2018, the pair have met on just 19 occasions, with Hamburg claiming 10 victories to St Pauli's two. That's not to say Hamburg have had to make do without any regular derbies at all, however – their rivalry with Werder Bremen has seen Germany's two northern port cities face off. "They've almost always been in the same division as us, and they're always extremely tense encounters," Hillebrand tells *FFT*.

Compared to St Pauli, Hamburg are without question the bigger, better-supported club. Their whopping 88,000 members – a figure held in higher esteem by German fans than anything as showy as number of titles won – make them the nation's seventh-largest side, behind only Bayern Munich, Schalke, Borussia Dortmund, FC Köln, Eintracht Frankfurt and Borussia Mönchengladbach.



Above Hamburg supporters make the short march to the Millerntor **Right** The hosts put on a hostile show in the snow

"HSV MAY HAVE MORE MEMBERS AND TITLES BUT OUR PASSION IS ADMIRED ALL OVER THE WORLD"

St Pauli, meanwhile, boast 30,000 – not to be sniffed at, but a considerable way behind. Even within the centre itself, Hamburg fans dominate. Far more of the city's bridges and canalways bear the club's blue, black and white colours than the brown and white of their neighbours.

St Pauli's nickname, 'Kiezkicker' (roughly translated as 'Neighbourhood Kickers'), tells you all you need to know. The St Pauli district houses just over 20,000 people and is where the bulk of the team's support is situated. Leaving the horns of passing ships behind us, *FFT* heads in that direction. Before kick-off, a sizeable section of the fanbase – including the diehard faction Ultra Sankt Pauli – are congregating at Susannenstrasse, a cobbled boulevard in the heart of the Kiez. Thousands of brown-clad supporters are found drinking beer as they prepare for an organised march to their 30,000-capacity Millerntor-Stadion, the venue for tonight's showdown.

"HSV [Hamburger SV] may have a lot more members and trophies than us," fan Patrice Engel tells *FFT*, cigarette in one hand, pint in the other. "But passion can't be measured. Look around and see it with your own eyes. It's always like this here, regardless of the division we play in. People around the world admire this club's passion."

Engel isn't overemphasising. Although they've been a Bundesliga side for a total of just eight seasons in their entire history, most recently in 2010-11, St Pauli are well-known all over the globe. Even those that know very little about football might be able to tell you something of their politics and image.

The reason is that, over time, St Pauli have carefully cultivated a reputation as a left-wing institution; a place where LGBTQ+ supporters, refugees, ethnic minorities and anyone else marginalised by society are welcomed with open arms. Rather than a hat tip to the city's seafaring links, St Pauli's association with the jolly roger logo – adorning many of the flags and scarves around us on Susannenstrasse – was started by the punks, squatters and prostitutes that began lining the Millerntor's terraces in the 1980s. It also led to another of the club's nicknames: 'Freibeuter der Liga' ('League Buccaneers').

"That core message promoting inclusivity and acceptance is absolutely vital to St Pauli," explains Engel, to nods of agreement from his leather-jacketed cronies. "We're a football club, but we're so much more than that, too."

THE AGE OF THE DINOSAUR

It's not just fans who have flocked to a club adhering to such heartwarming values. In 2020, Dynamo Dresden goal-getter Simon Makienok – previously of Palermo, Charlton and Preston – snubbed more lucrative offers to represent a club he admired. "St Pauli share my values of inclusivity, togetherness and social change," the 6ft 7in Danish striker tells *FFT*. "I wanted to play for them as soon as they were interested in me. The fans on matchdays, with their choreos and messages of togetherness, were inspiring – I'd always get goosebumps seeing that while I played."

Inevitably, rivals Hamburg are regularly painted as a politically-opposing entity. And while it's fair to say they've had occasional brushes with far-right hooliganism, it would be false to claim HSV lean overwhelmingly in one political direction. "St Pauli are certainly left-leaning," explains *SportBild*'s Hamburg reporter Torsten Rumpf. "But Hamburg aren't right wing as is often said."

"With such an enormous fanbase, there are always going to be a minority of bad apples," concedes fan group member Hillebrand. "But those people don't represent this club. St Pauli fans see politics as a core part of their club. Many Hamburg fans focus more on football."

Potshots aren't limited to politics, either. St Pauli supporters also enjoy telling Hamburg that they're not actually from the city. While St Pauli's Millerntor-Stadion is located in the ▸


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heart of the city – only a stone's throw from its seedy red light district – their foes' huge Volksparkstadion, almost twice the size of the Millerntor, is six kilometres away, "out in the suburbs" according to a sneering Engel.

And so, for most of their twinned existence, St Pauli and HSV's rivalry has consisted of these snipes, interspersed with the occasional cup or Bundesliga tussle. That was, until the latter managed to get themselves relegated to the second tier in 2017-18.

The unthinkable had been coming, though. After Son Heung-min's 12 goals had helped them to seventh place in 2012-13, narrowly missing out on Europe, Hamburg came 16th, 16th, 10th and 14th before eventually falling through the trap door in 17th.

"Mistake after mistake after mistake" was made, says journalist Rumpf, and Hillebrand agrees. "We didn't heed the wake-up calls," he laments. "Every season, we were battling against relegation. We chopped and changed the squad, overpaid for big names, changed coaches and didn't play with any discernible style. We were asking for it."

Hamburg's humiliation was compounded by the removal of the giant clock that had counted the years, days, hours and seconds they had been in the top flight. At the time of relegation, it stood at 54 years, 261 days, 36 minutes and two seconds.

"That clock really divided opinion among fans," admits Hillebrand. "For many, it was a source of pride – a reminder of our status as a founding member of the Bundesliga. However, others thought it looked a bit smug. Even our mascot, a dinosaur representing how long we'd been in the top tier, was used as a stick to beat us with." For St Pauli fans, watching their neighbours tuck into humble pie was a dream come true. "Seeing that clock finally stop, honestly, I pissed myself laughing," grins Engel.

Rather than dismantle the clock, Hamburg opted to reset it ahead of 2018-19, counting time elapsed since the club was formed back in 1887. At the end of the campaign, it was then changed to show the coordinates of the club's Volksparkstadion. "They were probably just about the only things we could do with it without taking it down," reflects Hillebrand. "It's caused a bit of debate among fans over the past few years."

The first ever 2. Bundesliga Stadtderby was in September 2018, more than seven years since the clubs' last meeting in the top flight. A fiery affair at the Volksparkstadion ended in a 0-0 draw, as St Pauli's fans mocked their rivals' hefty fall from grace. Heavy favourites Hamburg would exact revenge in the return fixture, though, winning 4-0 at the Millerntor in a match delayed late in the second period due to fans launching flares onto the field. "I'd like to apologise," then-St Pauli manager Andreas Rettig said after the match. "I have no problem with pyrotechnics, but this clearly went too far."

While Hamburg's comfortable victory kept them on course for automatic promotion after 25 games, it also proved an unwelcome turning point in their campaign. They failed to win any of their next eight outings, losing against Darmstadt, Magdeburg, Union Berlin, Ingolstadt and Paderborn, and finished fourth – a point short of the league's sole promotion play-off spot. If social media tittered at the time, those snipes have only grown louder in ensuing seasons, with Hamburg narrowly missing out on promotion on each occasion.

"We've been among the favourites to go up in each of our six seasons in the second tier," sighs Hillebrand. "But every time we look close we somehow fall at the final hurdle – it's massively frustrating."

To make matters worse, supporters have had to witness their team being repeatedly outperformed in games against St Pauli. The supposedly smaller side have triumphed in half of their 10 second-division showdowns – the giants winning three. Such a flurry of clashes, following the relative paucity in years gone by, has helped to rekindle old rivalries.

"In the build-up to these games, the whole city comes alive," enthuses Danish forward Makienok, who bagged a brace for St Pauli in a 3-2 victory at the Millerntor in 2021 and now plays for Hvidovre back in his homeland. "It means so much to both sets of fans. The atmosphere, the choreos, the passion you feel for that 90 minutes is indescribable. I'm still treated fantastically well by the St Pauli fans thanks to those goals."



Above No pyro, no St Pauli party **Right** Hamburg couldn't handle their neighbours in the first half

> "THE CITY COMES ALIVE IN THE BUILD-UP TO THESE GAMES. THE ATMOSPHERE IS INDESCRIBABLE"

HEIDENHEIM HEARTBREAK

As the St Pauli fans begin draining their beers in readiness for the stadium march, *FFT* asks one of the growing number of police officers carrying shields if the rise in Stadtderbies has caused any headaches.

"There's always trouble whenever St Pauli and Hamburg play each other," the officer mumbles through a thick scarf. "There are more than 500 officers on duty throughout the city today – in recent years, we've had to make dozens of arrests and increase the manpower in order to control supporters."

Until tonight, last term's second meeting, in late April, had an argument for being the most significant yet in footballing terms. With just five games of the 2022-23 season remaining, both clubs were in contention for promotion having taken altogether different routes to get there.

St Pauli were a team on the rise. Ahead of the World Cup, they'd languished above the relegation places on goal difference alone. Head coach Timo Schultz was sacked and his assistant Fabian Hurzeler, then only 29, was appointed as his replacement, becoming the youngest manager in the top three divisions. Hurzeler's side immediately won 10 games in a row, a sequence that propelled them to within six points of their cross-town rivals, who were fighting for promotion.

"Hurzeler has done an absolutely amazing job," Engel tells *FFT*, as dozens of flares are lit around us and the chanting begins. "We'd been in serious danger of slipping down to the 3. Liga before he took the reins. Not long after, we were in with an outside chance of promotion to the Bundesliga."

The German press had dubbed Hurzeler's team 'HSV-Jaeger' ('Hamburg hunters'). HSV themselves had started the campaign strongly, but a stumble during February and March had harmed their promotion hopes. As a thunderous affair got underway at the Volksparkstadion, Hamburg trailed 1-0 after half an hour but recovered to lead 3-1 after 52 minutes. Despite a late brown-and-white rally, the home side held on for a 4-3 victory. Post-game, ecstatic sporting director Jonas Boldt encouraged fans to "walk through the city and breathe in that victory, breathe in that atmosphere." *FFT* can only assume how delighted police were with that suggestion.

But the hubris wouldn't last. On the final day of the season, Hamburg knew three points at Sandhausen would seal automatic promotion, provided Heidenheim didn't win at bottom-dwelling Jahn Regensburg. HSV kept up their end of the bargain, triumphing ▸


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1-0 thanks to Jean-Luc Dompe's third-minute goal. With Heidenheim trailing 2-1 in injury time, promotion seemed so certain that the Sandhausen announcer congratulated them over the PA system. "There were supporters running onto the pitch and celebrating," says Hillebrand. "Then the unthinkable happened."

Heidenheim equalised in the 93rd minute, then scored again, with the final kick of the game, in the 99th minute to pinch Hamburg's promotion place. "It was like a punch in the guts," says Hillebrand. "We couldn't believe it. We still qualified for the play-off game, but the second-tier side hardly ever wins that."

So it proved, as Hamburg lost the first leg at Bundesliga strugglers Stuttgart 3-0 and eventually went down 6-1 on aggregate. "It was a brutal watch, but I can't say I didn't enjoy it," laughs St Pauli supporter Engel. "It ended up being a good season for us. We'd turned a corner under Hurzeler, things were looking bright again and HSV crumbled in the most humiliating way. What more could you ask for?"

St Pauli's blistering form under Hurzeler has continued into this campaign. Going into the derby, they had led the table since matchday eight, remaining unbeaten, with HSV not far behind in second place.

Hurzeler appears to be relishing St Pauli's 'Buccaneers' moniker more than anyone. His 3-4-3 system relies on aggressive pressing, flying wing-backs and targetman Johannes Eggestein plundering goals using his bonce. Australian midfielder and captain Jackson Irvine, once of Burton and Hull, could have stepped straight out of a pirate film with his long hair and goatee beard, while English wideman Dapo Afolayan, signed from Bolton in January, has provided energy and direct running across the front three. "There's an obvious playing style," says *SportBild* reporter Rumpf. "They're the best coached side in the league this year and, maybe for the first time in the history of this derby, favourites to win."

Tim Walter's Hamburg are also a talented group, containing several internationals of their own, but have often relied on individual moments of magic as opposed to an effective style of play. "We started the season really strongly, as we often do in this league," says Hillebrand. "But we've had a bit of a wobble. We haven't been able to string a series of wins together and, I have to admit, St Pauli are the favourites. But if we win, we'll go joint top on the same points. We'll need to be at our very best tonight."

"WATCH OUT FOR THAT BOBBLE..."

The time has come to find out. As darkness descends arounds us, St Pauli's ultras groups begin their march to a deafening chorus of "HSV ist Scheisse!" (no need for a translation). Flares burst overhead as clouds of red and white smoke fill the streets. Fireworks explode out of the melee and police bark warnings through megaphones. As the march careers into the thoroughfare leading to a glittering Millerntor, a police helicopter whirs overhead, keeping watch over the masses down below. *FFT* can only assume that, not far away, rival fans including our Football Fanatics Hamburg chums are making their own way through the streets to the Millerntor. When we finally reach the ground, we quietly slip away from the madness and head to our seat.



"DERBIES ARE THE BEST. I DON'T LIKE TO SAY IT, BUT IN AN IDEAL WORLD BOTH CLUBS WILL GO UP"

If the streets of Hamburg were a spectacle, they're nothing compared to what awaits us inside. Before kick-off, the away end is making all of the noise, as Hamburg supporters wave scarves in unison and chant in rhythm to a beating drum. As the two sides are led out, though, something spectacular happens.

The lights are dimmed as a striking choreo unfurls in the home end. It's a pirate ship, showing a cartoon captain setting a course for St Pauli. In the wooden bowels of the boat, portholes are cut away and red flares billow smoke through the openings. The away end responds with a staggering tifo of its own, as hundreds of carefully choreographed blue, white and black flags create a drape upon which a 'Hamburg' sign gently flutters above the roar. It's one of the most jaw-dropping sights *FFT* has ever seen.

The football itself doesn't disappoint either, with St Pauli swiftly living up to their billing as favourites. It's 1-0 after only 15 minutes, as tireless captain and cult hero Irvine powers home a low corner with a vicious half-volley. A precise finish from Eggestein is disallowed for offside, but the home stands are erupting again soon enough.

St Pauli's goal to go 2-0 up is a shocker for the visitors and a gift for blooper compilation videos. Hamburg's attempt to play out from the back results in Guilherme Ramos riskily passing the ball across his own six-yard box. It takes a huge bobble at the worst possible moment and Portuguese goalkeeper Daniel Heuer Fernandes slices his clearance into the roof of his net.

Above Winger Dompe inspired a HSV fightback **Right** Both sides salute their fans after Pherai (far right) pounced to secure a point

As you'd expect, after one of the finest own goals of all time, almost 30,000 St Pauli fans break into cheers and laughter. At half-time, there's only one team in this game.

Derbies, however, have a way of surprising people. As snow begins to coat the Millerntor pitch, Hamburg's unlikely comeback begins in the second half. First, striker Robert Glatzel, formerly of Cardiff, pokes home from close range in the 58th minute to halve the deficit. Then, two minutes later, Dutch playmaker Immanuel Pherai finds himself with room to turn and finish inside the box. It's sloppy from St Pauli, but you have to hand it to Hamburg for clawing their way back into the contest. Well, *FFT* would if we had any sensation left in our hands, as the final whistle blows on a freezing evening.

"After those two goals, being behind at the Millerntor, in front of a full house against the league leaders, then hitting back through two beautifully-worked goals to pick up a point, a well-deserved point, we've proved ourselves worthy," Hamburg boss Walter tells reporters.

Elsewhere, St Pauli manager Hurzeler can't hide his agony. "Tonight we were very, very dominant and really compact until they got the two quick goals. I'm bitterly disappointed with the result."

As *FFT* ambles along the bustling streets towards Hamburg central station for the trip home, there's no answer from Engel, who's likely turned his phone off and is drowning his sorrows in the nearest pub.

We catch Hillebrand for a couple of clichés, though. "It was a classic game of two halves," he chuckles. "I think a point was fair. St Pauli were definitely better in the first half, but we were the better team after the interval."

Surely, given the emotion, passion and fiery football served up, both sets of supporters would prefer not to let this rivalry go dormant again in the immediate future. "Definitely," enthuses Hillebrand. "Derbies are the most enjoyable matches of the year. In an ideal world, and I don't really like saying this, we'd both go up this season."

After a hard day's night in the biting cold of Germany's northern seaport city, we're very much inclined to agree.








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ALL HAIL THE





Arsenal haven't won the Premier League in the 20 years since they went unbeaten throughout the 2003-04 campaign – *FFT* speaks to several of that immortal squad, as they relive a season that went down in history...

Words Mark White

INVINCIBLES

Water bottles were shaken up and sprayed in the obvious absence of anything alcoholic, as players danced in the north London sunshine. Some strode across the pitch with flags tied around their necks as capes; others basked on the hallowed turf. Highbury was in no hurry to empty.

Football is fleeting: it's a comfort and also a curse that nothing lasts forever. However, that afternoon, perhaps the most convincing and compelling case of immortality in the English game was presented to 38,419 people at Highbury, as Arsenal completed a 38-game league season without tasting a drop of defeat. It would become the single-most quoted statistic by any Gunners fan you will ever meet.

Over time, the Arsenal team of 2003-04 would become defined by that hollow column under the 'L' on the final table. Some would seek to humanise the feat, in comparison to modern squads. Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and others, meanwhile, would go on to normalise such calculated consistency. Even Sir Alex Ferguson would sneer that his bitter rivals drew far too many matches to have been truly worthy of the history books: he wouldn't be alone.

Frankly, however, invincibility was the least important thing about Arsene Wenger's Invincibles.

It was a team that delivered a brand of football space-age to its era. That could dazzle or destroy; give you life or take it away. That could almost collect three points in the tunnel before a ball was even kicked, such was their presence.

To judge them by their statistics is to read poetry by page numbers. Calling them 'Invincible' misses the point entirely, of what made those misfits so magical.

"I believe the target of anything in life should be to do it so well that it becomes an art," Wenger once philosophised. On that radiant day two decades ago, the Frenchman's side became far more than either invincible or immortal.

STONES AGAINST MACHINE GUNS

In February 2020, *FFT* asked former Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein which player he'd induct into the Premier League Hall of Fame. "That's easy," he replied instantly, "I'd say the entire Invincible team."

In 1983, he purchased a stake in his beloved Arsenal, at a time when the Gunners – and English football as a whole – were at a low point. Shaping the face of both his club and the league they'd storm, Dein was Highbury's charming face and prolific recruitment arm for more than two decades – as the broker behind countless acquisitions, it was he who convinced his board to take a chance on an unknown Wenger. It was Dein who helped the former Monaco manager to supplement an experienced squad with continental flair, bringing a Double to north London in 1998 – and Dein who assisted Wenger, as the pair reshaped the club in their vision for a second Double in 2002.

Today, the former Gunners chief sits opposite us once more. Picking a favourite player ever must be like choosing between children: as we remind him of our chat shortly before COVID, a grin forms on his face.

"I was fortunate enough to sign all the players," he remembers. "Sol Campbell was very special – he was coming from our neighbours and the way it played out, it wasn't easy. He could have gone anywhere, given that he was a free transfer. When I think about Edu coming in, it was discovered he had a false passport, and he nearly didn't come to the club because he was sent back to Brazil. Fortunately, we were able to sort it out for him. Bringing in Patrick Vieira wasn't easy, either – we weren't sure whether he was going to come to us."

Dein rarely signed a ready-formed superstar at Arsenal. But under Wenger's tutelage and with the oddly low angle of broadcast cameras at Highbury, those players became giants, striding out of the ground and stretching into the clouds.

"Football is down to top-class players; decisive players who make you win," Wenger would tell *FFT* in 2020. "The higher the level, the more the individual becomes key."







Right Arsenal's epic statistic is honoured inside the Emirates **Below** Campbell and Henry take a minute to enjoy the moment **Bottom** A heady day at Highbury in 2004

He and his good friend Dein had a knack for picking the perfect personalities. Wenger would speak of team spirit being like a flower, favouring a delicate touch when ensuring players blossomed – during his tenure, he'd tended to a side that had bloomed beautifully.

Heartbreak galvanised this team as much as glory, stutters adding steel. After losing a UEFA Cup final to Galatasaray on penalties in 2000 and FA Cup final to Liverpool and Michael Owen in 2001, Wenger's players recovered to find a brand of brashness that saw them embark on a 30-match unbeaten streak in the Premier League from December 2001 to October 2002.

Media hyenas cackled at Wenger brazenly claiming his charges could last a whole season on such a winning wave. They were right – Arsenal blew the 2002-03 title with a 3-2 defeat at home to struggling Leeds. Wenger, unshaken by his beliefs, made one senior signing the following summer: goalkeeper Jens Lehmann.

"Arsene felt like the team had done very well and could perhaps do better with the same squad," continues Dein. "So he was, I suppose, cautiously optimistic." ▸

THEY DELIVERED A BRAND OF FOOTBALL SPACE-AGE TO ITS ERA AND COULD WIN GAMES WHILE STILL IN THE TUNNEL, SUCH WAS THEIR PRESENCE

Did he genuinely think he could go all season unbeaten? Dein smiles again. "No, I think that was his own methodology of winding up the team to take them further up the mountain," he confesses. "We never discussed that, but I think that was his motivation."

Where Wenger had psychology, Chelsea had what Dein labelled at the time as a "tank parked on our lawn, firing £50 notes at us," with new owner Roman Abramovich. The Blues sanctioned 14 transfers that summer, while Manchester United – champions in four of the previous five seasons – pipped the Gunners to the signing of Cristiano Ronaldo. "You feel like you have stones against machine guns," Wenger would later say of the competition – when Manchester United beat them in the Community Shield on penalties at the start of 2003-04, Arsenal were considered outsiders for another title assault. Not that any of the players saw it that way.

"Expectations that season were still at the highest: win the domestic competitions and go as far as we can in the Champions League," right-back Lauren tells *FFT*, despite the *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Sunday Times* all pencilling them in for a third-place finish. The *Independent on Sunday* wagered they'd come fifth: there was even talk of a bid for Thierry Henry from Stamford Bridge.

"Thierry would never have moved to a rival for whatever money: no chance!" says former Gunners forward Jeremie Aliadiere. "We were so confident about how strong we were that we didn't even think about Chelsea, it wasn't even talked about."

SAN SIRO REVENGE

The swagger was initially well-placed, with the opening four fixtures yielding maximum points. Then came the blip: first Portsmouth raided Highbury of a point in the league thanks to a Teddy Sheringham goal, before a calamitous Champions League defeat to Inter in which the Nerazzurri won 3-0 and Obafemi Martins celebrated with somersaults: hardly ideal preparation for the weekend's upcoming grudge match against Manchester United.

"I think one defining moment in the season run has to be that game at Old Trafford when it was 0-0: Ruud van Nistelrooy's famous penalty miss and everything that happened," remembers Dein. A stalemate exploded with a late Vieira red card and Martin Keown bringing Van Nistelrooy down in the box. Referee Steve Bennett pointed to the spot.

"If they'd scored that, it's over: we're not coming back into it, we lose the match," Arsenal legend Ray Parlour tells *FFT* today. "I think that's why there was so much relief at the final whistle, that we'd managed to get out of there with a draw."

Relief can manifest in many ways. Van Nistelrooy smacked his spot-kick against the crossbar with practically the final kick of the contest: in the aftermath, Keown and colleagues surrounded the Dutchman, goading him, as coaches on both sides hurriedly rushed players back down the tunnel.

"It got a bit messy," says Dein. "Martin received a three-match ban, Patrick got a one-match ban, Ray got one and Lauren got four... When I say it was a team full of fighters, I mean that kindly – they had such camaraderie between them, such strength of spirit."

The unbeaten run came within centimetres of ending after just half a dozen matches – like a near-death experience, the moment would jolt Arsenal into life. Five days later, a fearless Newcastle side pushed the Gunners all the way at Highbury, only for Henry's late penalty to secure victory. Liverpool were then slain at Anfield courtesy of Robert Pires' screamer, in the Londoners' first seismic result of the campaign.

"That goal at Anfield felt like a privilege," Pires tells *FFT* of the strike. "I wouldn't say I have a favourite but if I had to pick one, that goal at Liverpool was the best I scored that season. The fans there are maybe the best in the whole of England."

Chelsea were next up to have a pop, only for Henry to play God once more. In a newly-energised derby between a burgeoning empire and one of the establishment, the Frenchman made his biggest statement yet on how he was becoming an inevitable force, impossible to defend. Far from just a superstar striker, Aliadiere saw his fellow countryman as a provider as much as a poacher.

"Every time I played, Henry wanted to play for me," he says, having started at Anfield aged 20 before watching on from the bench against Chelsea as Henry struck the winner. "He wanted to give me an assist and make me shine – he was very generous in that way. He was a real

Clockwise from right Henry put Inter to the sword at San Siro having lost at Highbury; Pires silenced the Kop with a corker; "Unlucky, Ruud!"



THE POINTS RANKING

Although the Gunners went unbeaten, they only just make the top 10 for highest points tally of a Premier League champion

Points	Team	Season
100	MAN CITY	2017-18
99	LIVERPOOL	2019-20
98	MAN CITY	2018-19
95	CHELSEA	2004-05
93	CHELSEA	2016-17





"IT WAS SO FUN PLAYING WITH THIERRY BUT HE NEVER ACCEPTED LOSING. I THINK THAT'S WHY WE STAYED UNBEATEN FOR SO LONG"

team player: I was a young French lad coming up and he maybe saw that side of himself in someone else.

"In training, watching all of the things he did and how he prepared mentally, that was a drive for me. He was someone for everyone else to learn from."

"It was so fun playing with Thierry around that time," concurs Pires. "But he was a winner and he didn't accept when he'd lost. He's really competitive and not just in games – training sessions were the same. He'd never accept being on a losing side. I think that's why we stayed unbeaten so long... Thierry was too competitive."

Henry couldn't accept the Gunners' faltering form on the continent either, with a draw against Lokomotiv Moscow and defeat at Dynamo Kyiv following the Highbury humiliation against Inter. In the run-up to the San Siro showdown, the No.14 failed to score in the North London Derby win against Spurs or 3-0 thrashing of Birmingham – but he had been instrumental nonetheless, providing all three assists in the latter fixture, with Birmingham boss Steve Bruce marvelling that Henry was easily the best player on Earth.

"I didn't give us much of a chance against Inter at their own ground, but on the night everything clicked," captain for the clash Parlour tells *FFT*. "I was alongside Edu in central midfield – Vieira wasn't there and Dennis Bergkamp didn't fly, obviously."

Henry punctured the floodgates with a bullet from outside the area on 25 minutes, only for Christian Vieri to level. In the second half, the Frenchman toyed with the Nerazzurri backline: first setting up Freddie Ljungberg for the visitors' second, then netting the third himself. That goal has become legendary: Henry races from the traps, Javier Zanetti tightly in pursuit. Like a cat teasing its prey, the striker lets his marker catch up, only to beat him on the outside again and slot the ball home with his weaker left foot.

"Funny that, isn't it?" Henry once remarked to *FFT*, when asked about his glittering record against Italian opposition. "I hear so often that it's easier to play against English defences..."

"To be fair to the Italian supporters, they clapped us off," reminisces Parlour. "Henry was on fire, he was so quick: Italian defenders are so good, but they couldn't keep up with him."

Arsenal would win 5-1 and end the group by knocking Inter out of the tournament. It was a statement result – a moment so grand that the captaincy could even have changed hands.

"After the match, I said, 'Boss, can I have a word with everybody?'" Parlour tells us. Wenger gestured that the floor was his. "I got up and said, 'Lads, fantastic performance tonight – and since we were so good under my leadership, I think I should be the captain going forward'."

Everyone started laughing, and Wenger sincerely hoped that Parlour was simply messing about.

"He said, 'No Ray, Patrick is our captain!'" Parlour relays with a grin. "We had fantastic team spirit and Wenger loved all of that humour."

DOUBLE CUP DEFEAT

In 2014, David Dein hosted an evening with Arsenal's three former Brazilian players: Edu, Sylvinho and Gilberto Silva. Dein asked Gilberto to tell him about the Invincibles and their resilience.

"He actually stood up and told me how they'd all stand in the tunnel before the game," Dein recalls to *FFT*. "The tunnel at the old Highbury was pretty narrow; all of the Arsenal boys in one line, the opposition in another. There was a ritual. There was always the same order: at the front, Patrick would turn around to Jens and give him a nod. Jens did it to Dennis, Dennis did it to Thierry, Thierry did it to Lauren, Lauren did it to Sol, and so on. It was almost choreographed as if to say, 'We're going to do this' – and they'd look at the opposition and sense fear in their eyes. They gave themselves inner strength when they went out." ▸

93	92	91	91	90
MAN CITY 2021-22	**MAN UNITED** 1993-94	**MAN UNITED** 1999-00	**CHELSEA** 2005-06	**ARSENAL** 2003-04

Momentum was beginning to build. Winning was becoming a habit and the monster mentality started to take form. "That mental strength was drilled into us by the older English players: Martin Keown, Tony Adams, David Seaman, Lee Dixon," says Aliadiere. "Some of them may not have been there at the time, but they were winners and taught us what it meant to play for Arsenal, the history of the club." These days, his Gallic tones are tinged with Cockney pronunciation, as if he's living proof of the point.

By Christmas, Arsenal could blow teams away. Of course, Henry was plastered across newspaper back pages every Monday – whether he'd knee-slid in the rain after scoring the winner against Manchester City or mugged Danny Mills by a corner flag – but it was much more than a one-man show.

"When you play with such an attacking team, you need to have pace at the back," Kolo Toure explains to *FFT*. "That's what Arsene did – Sol and I were fast, we had power, we were able to defend high lines and we could pin teams in with our quality."

Like his brother Yaya, Toure began life as a midfielder: Wenger turned him into a centre-back. In February, a month after the Gunners had moved ahead of Manchester United in the Premier League standings, Toure would net against Wolves, then Vieira and Edu scored the goals that sunk Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. Six days earlier, winter recruit Jose Antonio Reyes had bagged a brace when the Blues travelled to Highbury in the fifth round of the FA Cup, while Pires continued to chip in, too. It was a squad effort.

"Arsene assembled a great group with chemistry," adds Pires. "The tactic was always the same – always a 4-4-2 so everybody could find connections on the field with someone ahead of them or beside them. For me, as a creative player, it was amazing."

Form was rosy, with 10 consecutive wins in all competitions, when Arsenal went back to Stamford Bridge for a 1-1 draw in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals. Four days later, Henry launched a rocket beyond Manchester United's Roy Carroll in another 1-1 draw in the league at Highbury, in a game that the Gunners probably should have won. A Red Devils rematch was due five days later in the FA Cup semi-final at Villa Park.

"I think the difficulty, especially because you play those big games at the end of the season, is how you manage to get all of the players at their best when they're tired – that's the most important thing to overcome," Patrick Vieira explains to *FFT*, remembering the sole Paul Scholes strike of that afternoon. Manchester United 1 Arsenal 0: the Gunners beaten in the FA Cup for the first time since the 2001 final, having lifted the trophy in both 2002 and 2003.

Wenger shuffled his pack for that semi, leaving Henry on the bench so he'd be fresh for Tuesday's tussle against Chelsea in the Champions League. It didn't help: after torrid blue pressure, Wayne Bridge buried the winner three minutes from time in front of the Clock End. Dumped out of two competitions in four days.

HENRY GOES SOLO

The Gunners looked exhausted. Even for such strong personalities, the double-blow was difficult to take. "For me, the Premier League is the hardest league in the world, not just because it's so competitive: it's because it's longer than anywhere else," says Pires. "You never stop. It's a marathon that you start in August, finish in May and even play through the winter. You play on Boxing Day. You don't get time away to spend with family."

It was a week from hell. By half-time against Liverpool three days later, the sky was falling down. The visitors went one up at Highbury, only for Henry to equalise: with memories of the 2001 FA Cup Final fresh in minds, however, Michael Owen reinstated the lead. After 33 Premier League games unbeaten – three more than they'd managed during their previous run between 2001 and 2002 – they were at risk of losing to Gerard Houllier's men.

"That year, Wenger showed the ability to see what was happening and fix matches during half-time," Lauren tells *FFT*. "We were able to come back in games."

Le Professeur didn't have to get out the hairdryer, though. Just like when he insisted months earlier that his team could go unbeaten all season, the Frenchman simply reaffirmed his belief in the players at the break against Liverpool.





Above Henry often hogged back pages for his goalscoring... **Right** ...but Arsenal had a "great group with chemistry" – it was a squad effort

"EVEN OPPOSITION FANS APPLAUDED US"

Arseblog's Tim Stillman on following the Gunners in 2003-04

From 2000 until Highbury closed its doors for the final time in 2006, my seat was in the Clock End, perched snugly up against the barrier that separated the home fans and visiting supporters.

In April 2004, Thierry Henry received the ball from Gilberto Silva close to the centre circle, faced by the entire Liverpool team, and proceeded to dump half of them on their backsides en route to scoring one of the biggest ever goals for Arsenal.

I intended to celebrate that euphoric moment in my usual manner – by turning directly to the left and sharing my delight with the despondent travelling section. However, just as I did, I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of a Liverpool fan who appeared to be of roughly retirement age. I imagine he had witnessed those famous Liverpool teams of the 1970s and '80s in person, with Kevin Keegan, Kenny Dalglish and Ian Rush guiding the Reds to glory at home and in Europe.

As I prepared to goad the Merseysiders, he simply stood up and applauded Henry's solo stunner enthusiastically. That strike meant Liverpool were 3-2 behind, having been 2-1 up at the interval. They eventually finished fourth that season, so the game against Arsenal was crucial for them as well. But that gentleman, though pierced by the despair of concession, was overcome by the desire to applaud the goal he'd just seen from the world's premier player.

As Arsene Wenger once opined, everyone thinks they have the prettiest wife at home. But that moment, more than any other, brought into sharp focus why that Arsenal team was one of the greatest to play the game. That show of peer respect confirmed it.

That's what the Invincibles mean to me. Greatness. And the idea that, even though I'll probably never see a better Arsenal team, I was privileged to watch that one in the flesh.



Above "Winning the title in Spurs' back yard? We've had worse days..."

"We never needed a motivator – when you play for a club as big as Arsenal, you don't need any more incentive," says Pires.

Lauren adds, "It's one thing to be a boss, who orders people and has authority, and another to be the leader who's capable of persuading the group and convincing them to achieve the objectives."

Arsenal returned for the second period with newfound composure. Four minutes after the break, Henry combined with Ljungberg before laying off Pires to level: a minute later, he'd blitzed through the Reds' backline as if they were cones at Colney.

It was the moment that sealed Henry's status as the greatest player the Premier League had seen – pirouetting like a deer, past one, two, twisting Jamie Carragher inside out and applying his trademark slotted finish. He had the physique of a Pamplona bull, yet nebulous grace; for such a joyous entertainer, he could bend opponents to his will.

"Thierry was a perfectionist," reflects Dein. "I think perhaps he was motivated because the year before, he was the runner-up in the Ballon d'Or to Pavel Nedved. I think he believed he had something to prove.

"He was one of those players that whenever he received the ball, you instinctively moved forward in your seat. You felt the expectation was there for him to do something special – and invariably, he did."

Naturally, he'd complete his hat-trick that afternoon. A well-earned point at Newcastle preceded a 5-0 larruping of Leeds, in which Henry plundered four goals. It set Arsenal up for the trip to White Hart Lane. Just a point would clinch the title.

Three minutes in, a classic counter saw Henry accelerate away from Tottenham legs, thread a ball to Bergkamp, who was waiting to tee up Vieira. Half an hour later, the was ball returned to its master: Bergkamp found Vieira again, who pulled the ball back for Pires to grab a second. Arsenal weren't just waltzing to the title, they were performing victory laps with sumptuous team goals to celebrate.

"It was a unique team," agrees Toure. "It was the squad, it wasn't only the starting XI: it was a squad in which players could walk into any position. If you took out one player for another, the level of the team stayed high."

Two replies from Spurs secured a 2-2 draw, but it wasn't enough to spoil a party on their patch. In a small corner of their bitterest rivals' garden, Arsenal players celebrated with their fans – and an inflatable Premier League trophy – as champions of England.

"I suppose there was some extra spice and satisfaction at winning it in our neighbours' backyard," smiles Dein, having watched his side also clinch titles at Anfield and Old Trafford. "I can always remember, for every game as the run went on, I'd pop down to the dressing room after the final whistle, shake the boys' hands and we'd talk about the match. As each game was going by, Sol Campbell, in his inimitable fashion – he's a man of few words – would just say, 'Mr Dein, we've got to keep it going'."

A CAPTAIN'S FINISH

While most title winners relax after guaranteeing the title, Arsenal had to follow Campbell's mantra. "I knew that often when you win a league championship, you lose the next game because the concentration isn't the same any more," Wenger told *FFT* in 2020. He needed to find the depth to persuade a frazzled dressing room that they could dig deep and muster more.

"The hardest four games, believe it or not, were the last four games of the season where we'd won it and were trying not to take our foot off the pedal," Parlour tells *FFT*. "The aim at the start of the season was to win the Premier League, but we didn't think about going unbeaten."

Even though Wenger had mentioned it a year before? "He thought we could do it but he didn't say during pre-season, 'Right lads, this is the season we go unbeaten'," explains Parlour. "The most important thing for the club was winning the league. It was only once we'd won it, there was that extra commitment to say, 'Let's put it all in and go get that record'."

Those four fixtures had flap and fluster, as the Gunners played with butterflies. The second of them was a 1-1 draw on a Tuesday night at Portsmouth, where a hostile reception awaited Pires due to the dubious penalty he'd won at Highbury in September, earning another 1-1 draw. *FFT* broaches the subject by referencing 'That night at Fratton Park'... ▸



Pires chuckles nervously before we finish the sentence. "I apologise to Portsmouth supporters: I'm so sorry!" he confesses, 20 years later. "There was a touch so I fell a bit... but the defender did touch me. Of course, I'll dive a little if I feel contact! That's football in the moment – if you feel contact, you're going to go over."

"The Pompey players were really disappointed with the result," says Parlour. "At the end, they were saying, 'We should have won that 4-1', which was hard to argue with, to be honest!"

Either side of that draw, the newly-elected champions would labour to a stalemate at home to Birmingham and 1-0 win at Fulham. On the final day of the season, a relegated Leicester took the lead at Highbury through ex-Gunner Paul Dickov – a jumpscare before Henry, naturally, equalised with a penalty.

Just as in 1998, when Tony Adams supplied the last strike of a title-winning campaign, the skipper had the final say once more. Watch the 73rd and final league goal of Arsenal's 2003-04 season and you'll see Bergkamp standing in shot alongside Vieira, 35 yards from goal, before the latter darts out of his marker's pocket. Like so many moments that year, it seems choreographed. Bergkamp chisels a pinpoint pass into the Frenchman's dancing feet. Vieira sidesteps the keeper and secures a 26th win of the season.

"For me, it's about the team and not the individual," Vieira modestly tells *FFT*. "Look at Manchester City last season. They didn't have major injuries, all the players were playing their best football at a really key moment. They found that momentum when they knew how close they were to making history."

That day, Arsene Wenger's Arsenal entered the annals themselves. "You look at all the great teams in history, and only one has ever gone unbeaten," says Paul Merson, a two-time title-winner with the Gunners himself, in 1989 and 1991. "Everybody has lost a football match."

Bar two Arsenal captains. "Well, Tony Adams was an Invincible," says Merson. "We only lost one match when we won the league in 1991... and he didn't play in it."

FOREVER IMMORTAL

The legacy of that Invincibles side has lived on ever since. "The things I learned from those guys, just on a day to day," smiles Theo Walcott as *FFT* asks him about that iconic 2003-04 team.

The winger signed 18 months after that league triumph, aged just 16, training alongside those titans and feeling the weight of such an achievement over the next dozen years of his Arsenal career. Perhaps, in some moments, that was good. Perhaps, in others, not so much.

"I was coming into a totally new environment, playing with some of these players," he continues. "I was quite shy as a kid back then, and at times I simply wanted the ball and to express myself.

"The way they improved me in training each and every day... they didn't just make me a better player, it made me a better person, too. Being with Arsene, and having that support from him, was really key during that period, and that age."

Twenty years on from that sun-spangled afternoon against Leicester, the patch of pitch that it all happened on has since been turned into luxury apartments, but they're still the best-kept gardens in the capital.

THE OTHER INVINCIBLES

Like Arsenal, these teams are among those who have completed a league season unbeaten

PRESTON
1888-89

The inaugural season of the Football League was topped by North End, whose mostly Scottish team won 18 and drew four of 22 encounters. Long used as an asterisk to prevent the Gunners from calling themselves the only Invincible English champions, Preston also did the Double: take that, Arsenal (or Royal Arsenal, as they were then).

LIVERPOOL
1893-94

Think your club's rivalries run deep? Try the 1893-94 play-off between Liverpool and Newton Heath (Manchester United's former guise). Liverpool went unbeaten in their first league season, in Division Two – still the only side to do so below the top tier – then prevailed in the promotion play-off. Fergie's Victorian forebears vowed to knock them from their perch.

REAL MADRID
1931-32

Considering Real Madrid and Barcelona's dominance in Spain, it's odd that La Liga's last undefeated champions were Madrid FC (not yet titled Real) in 1932. Barça came perilously close in 2018, mind, when Levante's Emmanuel Boateng hit a hat-trick to stun them 5-4 in the penultimate fixture and ensure a lifetime's welcome inside the Bernabeu.

PERUGIA
1978-79

The Grifoni have never won the Scudetto, though they did avoid defeat in 1978-79. They still finished second to Milan, mainly as they won only 11 of their 30 matches and drew the other 19, boring rivals into submission, which admittedly is impressive in that league. As if things couldn't get any more Italian, they had a match-fixing scandal in 1980. *Santo cielo!*

STEAUA BUCHAREST
1986-89

The most unwatchable three years in the history of football? Romania in the late 1980s is a contender, with Steaua going unbeaten for three seasons on the bounce. Their run lasted for 104 matches: never complain about farmers' leagues ever again, OK? They were decent on the continent, too, lifting the European Cup in 1986 and reaching the final again in '89.



"IN A WAY, I BELIEVE THAT GUARDIOLA PLAYS IN A SIMILAR WAY TO WENGER – I THINK ARTETA HAS INHERITED IT, TOO"

Above and left Wenger's finest feat has taken on mythical status; the Invincibles invade Islington

At the Gunners' training ground these days, a mural of Wenger – hand raised to wave to his adoring subjects – is plastered on the wall.

Many of the modern players who now high-five it would have been tucked up in bed by the time Javier Zanetti and Marco Materazzi argued over who got to swap shirts with Henry in November 2003. Declan Rice was four years old back then, Bukayo Saka just two. They're too young to have dyed their hair bright red like Ljungberg.

The football that 2003-04 side played and the webs they weaved – and how Wenger encouraged so many to express themselves – would become mythical to later generations. Invincible Edu is now the club's sporting director, while manager Mikel Arteta, academy supremo Per Mertesacker and under-18 boss Jack Wilshere all played for Wenger. It's a clear strand of DNA.

"Our legacy is in the playing style philosophy, which is still relevant," Lauren tells *FFT*. "If you look closely, that style of play is still working, it's something characteristic of the entire structure of Arsenal."

"Arsene is a football purist," smiles Dein. "He's a fan of the expression 'Possession with progression'. He loves the passing game and with the Invincibles, you'd have 20-30 passes before the opposition get the ball.

"You had such craftsmen, such skilful players: to assemble that team and for them to have the right mentality, it was a superb achievement. In a way, I believe that Pep Guardiola plays in a similar way to Arsene – and I think Mikel has inherited it as well."

To simply call Wenger and his greatest accomplishment 'invincible' is to reduce that side to just being nothing more than winners. They were so much more: entertainers, innovators, artists. Did Wenger influence the game more than his contemporaries? Did he bring more joy, coax more wonder, than teams who would eclipse his points tallies, or win more trophies? Who can say.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: even Sir Alex Ferguson would concede the unbeaten record "stands above everything else". "I won 13 leagues, but I was never near going a season undefeated," he said.

Ultimately, Wenger saw his job as "to give people who work hard all week something to enjoy on Saturdays and Wednesdays." Sometimes, it might have been a fleeting moment in 90 minutes of a hurricane. But when you strive for perfection, moments that feel like that stick with you forever. Football immortality is nearly always rendered temporary. Invincibility has many forms.

"I think a lot of managers have tried to imitate his style of football – and imitation is the greatest form of flattery," says Dein. "It's good for the game: it's a pretty style, seeing how many passes a side completes. When you see the Invincibles, it's a pretty tapestry to watch."

MILAN
1991-92

Arsene Wenger has noted Arrigo Sacchi as an influence on his 4-4-2: perhaps he was also inspired by his Invincibles. The ex-shoe salesman guided Silvio Berlusconi's Rossoneri to a loss-less triumph in 1991-92, with Marco van Basten leading the line. They drew as many as Arsenal's Invincibles, and in fewer games: one for Gunners fans to use in battle.

PERTH KANGAROOS
1994

In a bid to lure Singaporeans to football, the local FA invited a pair of Australian teams to compete in their league. The division was so weak that the Kangaroos stormed to the title unbeaten – fellow Aussies, the Darwin Cubs, finished second. Perth immediately went bust – a lesson to Super Leagues: do not add new clubs willy-nilly, however cool their names are.

AJAX
1994-95

Only one team has ever been crowned European champions in the same season as going unbeaten in the league. Louis van Gaal's revered Ajax side conquered all before them in 1994-95, plundering 106 goals in 34 Eredivisie matches, then celebrating Champions League glory thanks to a winner from teenage striker Patrick Kluivert against holders Milan in Vienna.

PARTIZAN BELGRADE AND OBILIC
1998-99

Not one but two teams went unbeaten in the First League of FR Yugoslavia in 1998-99 – Partizan and Obilic drew twice against each other, but the former won 21 of their other 22 matches to prevail, despite Obilic letting in just nine goals. Obilic were then banned from Europe as owner Arkan had been charged with war crimes.

RANGERS
2020-21

Steven Gerrard's Gers rounded off an unbeaten campaign in 2021, four years after Celtic did it during Brendan Rodgers' maiden spell as boss. That was the first time it had happened north of the border since the 19th century – Rangers' 1899 vintage successfully won all 18 of their league matches, in response to the invincible Celtic side from the previous season.

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